

Disclaimer: My house belongs to the bank, my work belongs to my boss and my money is always confiscated by my wife. And Harry Potter belongs to JK Rowling... Damn...

Rocking the boat

By LaCroix

Chapter 1 – The last straw

June 27th, 1996, early afternoon, King's Cross

Most people thought he was just moody. Some people, who thought they knew him, probably thought he was sad; but only one or two people in the crowd here at Platform 9 ¾ might be able to see how he really felt. Angry - so angry, it hurt.

Of course, his face didn't show it. His upbringing had taught him to pretend he was moping when he in fact was furious. After all, Harry being sad was a welcome sight; however showing his anger would have earned him a beating. Kids learn fast.

'He lied to me. And now Sirius is dead.'

That was the only thought he had and it plagued his mind and soul. His thoughts alternated with memories of Sirius, memories of Dumbledore, and how looking back allowed him to view past events in a new light.) For example, on his first trip to Hogwarts the train had been filled to the brim, yet oddly enough Harry had found himself in an empty compartment until Ron stumbled in. One could only wonder. The Mirror of Erised had only been used for safeguarding after Harry had learnt about its secret. And all those obstacles keeping the stone safe? They were first year curriculum problems with chess thrown in, probably because Ron could help him there. Also, Dumbledore had known that Harry would meet Voldemort down there. The Headmaster had even told Hermione so when she found him. Then the basilisk – he supposedly knew everything that goes on in the Castle, but a huge snake isn't noticed? The incompetent defence teachers he hired every year, Snape – who counted as an atrocity all on his own - and all the systematic trouble with the Slytherins. And then to top it all off that damned prophecy, which he'd only just found out because he was somehow deemed 'Ready' to hear it, now!

"He used me; it was all a game to him. He lied, all the time and now, because of it, Sirius is dead." Harry mumbled under his breath.

So there he stood, stoically, watching his minders of the Order of the Phoenix trying to threaten his Uncle Vernon. 'Good idea. As soon as you are gone, he will take it out on my hide. Thanks a lot.'

The entire ride home, Harry prepared for the worst. Vernon's skin glowed red with a hint of purple, a clear 9 on the uncapped Mt. Vernon scale. While the vein on the right temple was only pulsating - not throbbing - which indicated a mere 7. This was a bad sign - with a pulse that low and a blood pressure that high, Vernon would probably react violently. A higher pulse than blood pressure would indicate a good yelling. Harry knew all the signs by the time he had turned six. It was a good thing Lockhart had vanished the bones in his arm - the newgrown bone was straight and didn't ache in the cold.

Right now, Harry was alternating between being angry at Dumbledore, being angry at the Order members for enraging Vernon and just generally being sad over Sirius's death. Of course, Voldemort and his merry gang of killers got their share of cussing, too, but still, the disappointment over Dumbledore's lies was firmly in lead.

'All the time he knew why Voldemort was after me, he knew that he would come back. He certainly knew about the Dursleys. Was he just setting me up for his games? What else is he keeping from me? And of course, he'll keep me imprisoned in this house, just like he did to Sirius.'

Again, the thought of Sirius left him adrift in a sea of despair. Sirius was the only one who always helped him, the only one who was there for him, the only one caring for him. And then it dawned on him, in all his loneliness; there was still one beacon of light. There was another one, who always helped him, stood by him but liked him enough to challenge him if it was to protect him from harm. Someone who was there for him unconditionally and still stood up to him. Someone he could disagree with, but talk things over still remain friends in the end.

Someone he could count on.

"Boy! Get your worthless hide in, now!" Vernon suddenly bellowed at him.

Harry hadn't even noticed that they were already there. Quickly, he got out of the car and hefted his trunk out of the boot. Hedwig was still in her cage, napping. With the Dursleys already inside, he dragged his stuff into the house, put it down and reached behind him to close the door. As he turned to head into the living room a ham sized fist greeted the left side of his face followed by a stinging impact. The second thing that greeted him was a nice assortment of stars, blinking merrily in his view.)

Harry was by no means bulky, but he was an athlete now and his pain threshold was much higher then it was when he was smaller.

So instead of being thrown back into the wall like he would have been before, only his torso got turned to his right. And then the pain hit him. Not much, but enough to clear the cobwebs from his head. No one who ever endured a Cruciatus would ever again call a slap in the face pain. Then he noticed something - a coppery taste in his mouth - blood, his blood. Aright then, at that moment, something inside of him snapped.

His vision blurred, and suddenly he saw himself and his friends once again in the Ministry, fighting for their lives, and every time they managed to down an opponent, his friends would wake him or untie him just as quickly. And when they got up, they retaliated with all they had. Harry was sure that he had stunned one of his opponents at least three times, while all his friends were attacked by potentially lethal curses. The Order had done no better. It had seemed as if they all were playing a kid's game, while the Death Eaters were in it for real.

With that realization, Harry knew that the kid gloves had to come off. Shaking his head, he reconnected with reality and heard Vernon yell something - probably a rant about Harry - before winding up for another hit. But it never came, because Harry did something he had never even considered doing before.

He hit back.

Now Harry was not what you would call strong, but holding onto a broomstick while making multiple-g turns definitely tones the muscles in your chest and arms. All this sinewy muscle was, thanks to Vernon's love tap, in full tension. Harry pulled back with all the power he could muster and let his arm snap forward, pushing all of his weight behind his fist.

The punch was fast and to the point, and maybe even aided by some accidental magic. His fist connected with his uncle's jaw, knocking the man over and to the ground. Thanks to all the chins his uncle sported, Harry didn't even hurt his hand.

There was a second of silence, only interrupted by the angry screeches of Hedwig in her toppled cage. Vernon was on the floor, shaking his head to clear the haze, Petunia was staring at her nephew and Dudley just blinked at him stupidly. Then Petunia shrieked, waking Dudley from his stupor. The boy instantly charged at Harry, like a lame bull on crutches, though Harry, thought he might be insulting the bull with that comparison.

Knowing fully well that 'Ickle Duddykins' could flatten him with a single hit, he dodged the slow punch – everything is slow when you are used to dodging iron balls while speeding around at sixty miles per hour – and took a step to his left. Using his momentum, he pulled his right leg up and kneed Dudley in the crotch. Surprisingly, he actually hit something that small.

Meanwhile, Vernon had somehow managed to get onto his feet again, sporting a perfect bruise on his cheek, and started moving towards him. Harry finally had enough and drew his wand.

"Stop! Or lose your head!" he yelled, pointing it straight at his uncle's face.

That was unexpected. Vernon jumped backwards, staggering, as his belly wanted to continue in motion. He came to a halt in a grotesque state of animated stillness, his gut wobbling around wildly. Petunia stopped screaming and Dudley, well, he moaned a bit quieter.

"You can't use magic! You'll get expelled!" Vernon reminded him in an angry voice, though his face showed the fear that normally only shown in his eyes, for the first time in Harry's memory.

"And you would still be dead. Couch, now!" Harry retorted as he kicked Dudley to gain his attention. "You too! Move it!"

Harry took one step backwards towards the door - finding safety in the distance - and waited for the Dursleys to assemble in the sitting room. He waited till they were seated before he followed, keeping an armchair between them for security. All the time, his wand never veered off target.

"All those years, you, you..." he began, trying desperately to find suitable words. Finally they came to him - and they fit so well.

"Yes, there is simply no other word for it," he stated with a feral grin, before laying in on them. "All those years, you freaks had nothing better to do than make my life hell." he ranted, only to notice Vernon's reaction to their new title. The fat man had jumped, as if stung.

"What's the matter, uncle Vernon? You don't think you are a freak? No? So normal people put a kid into a cupboard? They let their son beat that kid up and cheer him on? Make the kid do all the work in the house? Let him rot in his cupboard for days with a broken arm? Is that what normal people do?" Harry asked, savouring the moment his relatives' expressions fell. Vernon nearly looked like a bulldog when his cheeks sagged like that.

Now Harry knew how Hermione must feel all the time. Using logic against dumb people – to make them see the error in their ways - was simply priceless. This feeling was great.

"They don't. So if you are not behaving like normal people, you must be freaks. Live with it." He finished; knowing that no Cruciatus could ever hurt them more than that knowledge.

"You're feeling mighty strong now, with your stick and hocus-pocus, aren't you?" was all Vernon could retort. Petunia was close to tears, and Dudders was still curled up on the couch, hoping for the pain to end.

"Remember, Uncle, I knocked your lights out while you didn't even rock me and I did so without my 'stick' or my 'Hocus-pocus'. But as is, I don't want to dirty my hands any more on you freaks!" Harry

spat, knowing that he was channeling Malfoy, but he didn't care. He continued glaring daggers at his Uncle.

"And what are you going to do now?" Petunia interrupted their staring contest. Looking at his aunt, Harry noticed a new side of her. He'd never seen her so afraid before.

Harry stared into her face for a full minute, not saying anything. Then he started looking at all three Dursleys in turn. For at least 5 minutes, he just stared, silently considering their fate. Even Vernon was wise enough not to anger him any further. Frankly spoken, he didn't look as though he would dare to.

For the first time in his life, he was afraid of his nephew. Harry stood there, only his head moving, as he watched his relatives. His posture was rigid, and his face was cold. Deep inside, Vernon knew that he had finally gone too far, and Harry was about to settle the bill. Petunia wept silently, having come to the same conclusion. Dudley had not realized the danger, but was still enough in pain to keep quiet.

Just as the silence grew unbearable, Harry sighed. His shoulders fell and he turned away from them. Talking to nobody in particular, he simply addressed the room.

"I'll settle for my second biggest wish. I'll go and grab my things, and then I'm gone. I'll never return here again. And if I ever hear about you getting captured to bait me, I won't even raise a finger. We are done."

With that declaration, Vernon exhaled a breath he didn't even know he had held, and Petunia broke down against his shoulder, weeping.

As Harry turned to leave, Dudley was stupid enough to call out. "And what is your biggest wish, freak?"

Harry stopped and slowly turned back around to face them again. He fixed his eyes on Dudley, the cool anger he felt pouring out. The fat boy had the presence of mind to gulp. Vernon and Petunia looked at Harry with pure terror etched into their faces, both expecting the worst.

In a very low whisper, Harry let his cousin know what he would like to do, most of all, right now. Then he turned and left the house, all his worldly belongings still in his trunk, and Hedwig still in her cage, as his last words still echoed in the minds of his relatives, never to be forgotten.

"To kill all of you."

And so Harry left what had been his own personal hell, for as long as he could remember. At least, he intended to. He made it all the way to the sidewalk, when a familiar face crossed his path.

"Where do you think you are going, Mr. Potter?" Obviously, Mr. Diggle was not pleased to see Harry leave the premises.

"My own way!" Harry declared roughly trying to push past the diminutive man.

"Dumbledore told you that you are not to leave that house!" was the answer he received, indicating that Diggle hadn't understood the second implied meaning in Harry's answer.

Harry was certainly not taking orders any more, and challenged those new ones immediately. "On what authority does he get to say so? School is out, and I can't see any legal cause to keep me under house arrest."

Diggle paled a bit at that statement. "But, but, but..." he stuttered, before he got himself under control again. "He is Albus Dumbledore!" he exclaimed, as though that should explain everything.

"Which gives him no right to keep me under arrest!" Harry quipped, once again trying to step past the man.

"He is the leader of the Order!" Diggle tried reasoning as he moved to block Harry.

"Of which, I am not a member, as you certainly know." Harry said while he smirked at the man, stepping to the other side.

"I can't let you leave!" Diggle retorted, finally resorting to intimidation after having run out of arguments. His attempt was rather laughable as his head only reached Harry's shoulder.

"You see this shiner?" Harry asked, making sure to turn his head to make it more visible. "That was the welcome I received from my uncle after only 10 seconds of being in that house. I am not going back in there."

Diggle didn't back down. "Dumbledore said you must stay here!" He yelled at the teen.

"And I won't listen to that old lying bastard any more!" Harry said, and again stepped aside to continue his path, but Diggle grabbed his arm.

"Now see here, you can't talk about Dumbledore like that! You are going back in there." The man said with a note of finality that rankled Harry's temper.

Harry shrugged him off and gave him a shove. "Mr. Diggle, you've got exactly ten seconds to leave here, or I will have you arrested for trespassing and kidnapping. Wouldn't that be nice after I just got hailed as the savior of the wizarding world - at least for now - and probably just have toppled a minister?"

That statement really made an impact on Diggle. Being threatened by a teen didn't go down to well, and he reacted like any small-minded suck-up would. He got mad.

"Stop that childishness! And now get in, or I'll make you!" Diggle snapped, and drew his wand.

Daedalus Diggle had never, ever been on an Order combat mission. For good reason, it seemed - because Harry had grabbed the man's wand and snapped the top half off before Diggle had even finished the draw or had even noticed the move. The fierce right hook to his stomach however, was more than noticed.

While poor Daedalus was soiling the street with the contents of his stomach, Harry grabbed his stuff and left.

The last thing Diggle heard as he laid groaning on the ground was Harry yelling over his shoulder, "Tell the old bastard that I've had enough of his lies. I'm gone!"

As soon as he was out of sight, Harry opened the dented cage and released Hedwig. He discarded the now useless cage in a dustbin, since it was only dead weight now. After thinking about his situation, he made a quick decision - Harry told Hedwig to fly to London, and to wait for him at Hyde Park, by the lake. He reasoned that it might take a while to find her there, but it was a public place and she wouldn't stand out too much there.

His next move was to take the first bus he found and rode around Surrey for some time, always taking the first available bus, to keep moving in case he was being tracked, until he finally got into one heading to London. Taking the train would have been faster, but he expected the Order to catch him right as he was leaving the station. He didn't expect them to check all the bus stops. Anyway, he could use the time to refine his budding plan.

First, he had to find a place to stay, and he had to keep out from under the Headmasters thumb.

He needed help, that was sure.

Sitting in the back of the bus, he surreptitiously got some parchment and his utensils out of his trunk and began writing a note to the only person who might help him now.

AN:

This is the start of my first really long fic. Bear with me, you'll like it.

For people noticing that Harry has a light type of PTSD - Yes, that was my intention. It would be expected after the things he went through a few days ago. In his case, it won't be permanent, but it has changed him.

I would like to thank embirsiphonelilathia (*puh, that is mighty hard to type correctly – now try it three times in a row*), who has given me invaluable advice while betaing this stuff for me. I could not ask for a better beta, since she has about the same preferences and

style, but due to a different chromosome pattern, has a different sight to some scenes than I have.

Also pfeil, my second beta, a human spellchecker. If there is any error slipped in this document, it is my fault for not transferring his corrections to the final document.

Chapter 2: The cavalry arrives.

Thankfully his money lasted long enough to get him into London. Harry made his way to Hyde Park and after only searching for a short time, found his owl sleeping in a tree near the northern end of the Lake. He did draw a few looks because of his trunk, but since the school year had just finished, some kids were returning from boarding schools, so it didn't raise too much interest, especially compared to his strolling around the park with an owl on his arm. That alone had some people giving him odd glances.

He sat at the edge of the lake on his now convenient trunk, stroking his owl - and getting even more curious looks for it - while he pondered his options.

Going back to Hogwarts was out. He didn't want to get back under Dumbledore's thumb.

Harry wasn't too worried about getting expelled, he had already received his OWLs and according to the twins he didn't need to worry about getting his wand snapped. Wand snapping only happened if the expelled student had not received his OWLs, yet.

The same would apply if a student had to leave Hogwarts because he failed to get the required OWLs to sign up for any NEWT course or lacked the money to continue. They would still be underage, but he would bet Galleons for Knuts that there was some archaic law that had been put into place to protect purebloods and granted them a waiver for that. He never found out much about the exact rules, though, as the twins had started in on the Umbitch shortly after their explanation.

Since he didn't know how to get around the Underage Decree, spell casting - especially in front of muggles - would really get him into trouble before he reached the age of majority, but that was only a year from now so he figured he could get by somehow. He would just have to hide from Tommy somewhere in the anonymous masses of muggles until then. It wasn't what he preferred to do, but it was his only chance.

Of course, he now had to hide from 'Alby and his Chipmunks' too. That would be much harder with Dumbledore probably having him

tracked by charms. He needed help, and there was only one person whom he could turn to. He had already finished his note during his hour-long rides crisscrossing Surrey and London, which he now tied to Hedwig's leg.

Fearing that he already had been stationary for too long and might get company, he got up and grabbed his trunk. He had caught glimpses of wizarding robes and pink hair every time he had changed busses, so he knew that they could find him if he stopped for too long.

With a final "Find her and stay with her," he let Hedwig loose and made a quick exit towards the city, finding himself an new bus to ride while he ignored some loud commotion back in the park.

*** June 27th, 1996, mid afternoon, northern Scotland***

Meanwhile, a certain Headmaster was having a bad day. About two hours ago, an ill-looking Daedalus Diggle had stumbled into his office, clutching his stomach. After Dumbledore had cast a strong pain numbing charm on him, poor Daedalus reported that Harry had left Privet Drive, and had even hit Diggle when he tried to stop him.

After a bit of probing, both verbally and mentally, Diggle confessed to having drawn his wand on Harry first, which made the Headmaster want to hit the man too, but it did explain the attack and the consecutive flight and disappearance of Harry to some extent.

To be honest, disappearance would be an excessive description of Harry's flight from Privet Drive. Dumbledore had a good idea in which direction and what distance Harry had travelled. He also knew that Harry was quite angry, which had been the boy's mood since the battle at the Ministry. His instruments had told him all this.

The only problem was that Harry kept on the move, never stopping for too long at any one place. Albus had immediately floored for two order members, Remus and Tonks, and sent them, via a portkey he had created, to Harry's location when the boy stood relatively still for long enough to get coordinates. After the two had left, he began the process of contacting the other order members.

He had chosen those two in particular for their closeness to young Harry, knowing that sending Severus, while his most trusted choice,

would certainly not help his case right now. The Potions master had already excused himself to the Dungeons to watch some cauldrons instead of 'Looking for a pampered prince who probably threw a temper tantrum because his lunch was served a minute too late', as the irate potion master had proclaimed.

Dumbledore did not hold him back, rather glad to have fewer distractions to deal with.

The aging wizard knew that to keep his plans together he needed Harry at his relatives' house where he could be kept under lock and key, so to speak. The time for Harry's battle with Voldemort had not yet come to pass; after all Albus still had many more things to put into place. There were still so many open ends Dumbledore had to draw together and close before the final battle. He had set these plans into motion years ago when the boy was still just a babe, and now he was close - so close - to achieving his ends. He merely had to wait just a little while longer until everything fell into a neat little line.

Dumbledore was feeling a little more confident after he sent Remus and Nymphadora off with a portkey, feeling glad that things would soon settle back into their 'divine' order. Much to his dismay, however, they returned after only a half an hour later, walking back into the school and into the chamber where the fully assembled core of the Order of the Phoenix was settling down for their meeting. They reported that the target coordinates had been a bus station in some town south of London, but when they arrived there, Harry was nowhere to be found. He had probably boarded a bus, but there were three lines he could have taken, and they couldn't discern which.

It had become apparent after a few more of those missions that Harry was keeping on the move to avoid detection. Tonks noted that the boy didn't seem to have a clear destination in mind either, and that made him that much harder to track. While Moody openly showed his pride in young Harry, Albus was not so happy about this turn of events. Unsurprisingly, Molly Weasley's voice rose above the din to whine and coo about how her poor little Harry was probably lost and alone in the metaphorical jungle that was muggle London, which grated on Albus Dumbledore's nerves. He had no idea how she even knew about Harry's escape, until he remembered that

damnable clock of hers; she had probably added a hand for Harry somewhere along the way.

Remus explained that he and Tonks had only been able to pinpoint the target area to the southwestern districts of Greater London. When he asked about why they didn't just watch all of the incoming buses in that area, Daedalus earned himself a rather loud and resounding laugh from Tonks. Remus went on to explain the relative size of that particular part of London to Hogsmeade, the distance between and number of bus stops in that area, not to mention the risk of exposure of wizardkind in front of the many muggles that swarmed the area if the order were to jump all over the town looking for Harry. After a few more minutes of explanation, they managed to convince the Order of the futility of that particular endeavour.

Being currently unable to enter Number 12, since Sirius had died and the new owner had not given permission yet, they had no Headquarters in London. Still, since Harry might be heading there, Dumbledore had Remus and Tonks stationed there to watch the house. If Harry went there and was the heir, as Dumbledore could only assume without having Black's will read, it would not do for the boy to find refuge inside that fortress of a house. Nothing but an all out Auror attack would bring those wards down, and Dumbledore would be hard pressed to explain why he had sent half their police force to their deaths just to retrieve a runaway.

Having that base covered, Dumbledore sent most of the other Order members off to different guard positions, weaving a net of competent sentries all over the most important points of magic in London.

Albus himself remained waiting in his office, along with the 'fast response members' and the Weasleys, watching his Distanciaheadometer.

It was his favourite piece, a fine pendulum floating in thin air above a rune-engraved base plate. The pendulum would point towards the target, which was set by a drop of blood in the pendulum's weight. A flywheel on the base plate indicated the target's speed by the speed of the disc's rotation, causing a whirring sound. That wheel would also rise on its axle, indicating the distance to the target. There was also a display with portkey coordinates, which was its most useful component, but the target would need to be stationary, or at least

approximately so, for at least 5 minutes for the coordinates to appear.

He always set it on the table while Harry was practising Quidditch or having a game he couldn't watch. The pendulum's movements alone were breathtaking. During the first task of the Triwizard Cup, it even got damaged by the excessive strain it had received while Harry raced all over Hogwarts with that dragon in hot pursuit.

'I wish I could have seen that. All paintings agreed those – the pendulum's movements were a quite a show.'

Only the improvements the Headmaster did after the repairs ensured that this gadget survived Harry's wrath in his office after Dumbledore had told the young man the contents of the prophecy. Harry had manually and magically trashed much of his office. Dumbledore had stayed calm at first, certain that he could repair everything. After a few hours of fruitless, frustrating work, though, he had learned something. When Harry destroyed something, it stayed that way. Most of his instruments, nearly all which were used to track Harry, were not salvageable and had to be replaced - except for this one.

The pendulum currently pointed southward, and the whirring wheel led the Headmaster to the conclusion that Harry must have arrived in London by now.

The wheel had slowed, indicating that Harry's speed had slowed as well, probably due to the heavier traffic. Finally, the wheel came to a near halt, signalling that Harry had more or less stopped.

About 10 minutes later, coordinates appeared.

Immediately, Dumbledore made a voice activated, two-way portkey that would return the party to just outside the gates of Hogwarts, which he gave it to Bill. He hoped that William Weasley - he never liked the abbreviation of that fine name - who had travelled all across Europe due to his job, would be able to blend into the muggle crowds better than the rest of people that crowded his office. The eldest of the Weasley boys immediately left the office and made his way out to the grounds, where he could use the portkey.

After a few minutes of anxious waiting, the door opened, and a soaking wet Bill Weasley came in, and instantly started shouting. "You sent me into The Serpent! Of all Hyde Park, you had to send me into the bloody lake!" he screamed, waving his hands madly, causing large splats of water to fly all over the office. A puddle had formed under his feet, slowly growing as his clothes dripped.

Albus cringed at this, while the twins broke down, holding each other and howling with laughter, both pointing at Bill. Every now and then, one would try to say something, which would send him and his twin into renewed gales of laughter.

Molly was so flabbergasted that she didn't even chide Bill for his language; She just stood with her mouth wide open as her son continued to berate the Headmaster.

"I materialized about 20 yards into the lake, right on the surface. On dropping, I lost my wand and the splash made quite a commotion, I tell you! I did catch a glimpse of Harry, but without my wand and with all the people gathering, I had to portkey out. If it weren't voice activated, I would have been certainly arrested or at least stranded in London," he spat while the Headmaster cringed deeper into his overstuffed chair.

Finally, Dumbledore regained his bearings and tried to salvage the situation.

"I understand your anger and I truly am sorry, William. But you know that using coordinates, a portkey will invariably differ by as much as a few dozen yards in any direction." Dumbledore explained as he dried the furious redhead with a few flicks of his wand.

It was well known that someone wouldn't have materialized into something, and it would have brought him to the best possible landing spot, but there was simply no way to compensate for a large body of water. Bill knew the ins and outs of this as well as the Headmaster, but it was an embarrassing faux pas for a wizard to fall into this trap.

"I know, but still!" Bill huffed, still angry at the man, before turning and addressing his mother. "Mum, can I borrow your wand? I have to get back and summon my wand before it gets washed ashore and picked up by someone." He pleaded.

"And stop laughing, you two!" Bill yelled at the twins who were still rolling around on the floor pointing at him and making yelping sounds, like puppies. They were laughing too hard to actually laugh properly.

After he got Molly's wand, he stomped out, and it took Molly a few minutes to silence her other two sons. Coincidentally, she did so by raising her own voice significantly, contributing again to the slow-building Headache the Headmaster had been developing all day. When the group finally resumed their watch of the silver instrument, they noticed that the wheel had picked up speed. Harry was on the move again.

same time, above northern London

Unknown to the Order members, another important player in the events soon to unfold was on the move. With rhythmic strokes of her white wings, she made her way north, doing her duty. Her senses drew her towards her target, which proved to be a detached house surrounded by a nice garden. The house and garden were encased by a small wooded area; it also had a small swimming pond with a terrace nearby. Like a homing beacon, the outline of a young human was laying there, on a recliner: her target.

It was a nice day out in High Barnet, perfect to lounge in the garden and read a book. Of course, that's exactly what Hermione Granger was doing. Her only concession to the scar that she now bore on her chest was that she was wearing a one-piece suit instead of a bikini. She had rationalized that she was far too white for a bikini still, anyway, so it wouldn't matter if she wore that thing for the next week it would take to let her scar fade - hopefully.

That scar, which she had received in the battle at the Ministry from Dolohov, was still a visible, thumb-wide pale line crossing her torso from her hip to her shoulder. Luckily, since it was from a seriously underpowered spell, Pomfrey assumed it would fade to a razor-thin line, or might even vanish completely if she stuck with her potion regimen. Hermione did so, nearly religiously. She loved her bikinis.

Unnoticed by the reading girl, Hedwig landed right next to her on a table, and immediately stuck out her foot to offer the letter.

And waited.

And waited.

After a 20 seconds wait, the bird was getting annoyed, and gave a hoot.

The sudden reproachful hoot right next to her startled Hermione. She jumped out of her seat and, in doing so, dropped her book. Being her typical self, she had gotten completely engrossed in her book and hadn't noticed anything. Of course, she never would have admitted to anyone that she was reading THAT kind of book. Everybody has a guilty pleasure, and Hermione was no exception. But if anybody ever knew that she read those kinds of paperback novels, she would never hear the end of it.

Startled as she was, she still lit up with a smile when she identified the bird.

"Hedwig! What are you doing here? It's not even a full day and you're already delivering letters? Has something happened?" she chatted happily, and bent over to retrieve the book, placing it on the table. Cover facing down, naturally. Her face still flushed from the intense chapter she had read; She sat and looked at the owl again.

The owl in question just hooted once more, and lifted her leg even higher, wiggling it a bit. Hermione finally got the hint and soon Hedwig could stand on both legs again, but still looked at Hermione expectantly. If she had been able to, Hedwig would have tapped one of her claws impatiently.

Hermione eyed the owl for a minute before cottoning on. "Oh, silly me, of course, you're hungry and probably waiting for a reply. Wait here; I'll get you something," she said, and rushed into the house to find some food and a dish.

After Hedwig was given some spare sausage and water, the letter was finally opened and examined by Hermione. She then took a short break and read it again. And then, a third time. Somehow, that letter could have been straight out of one of her beloved secret novels.

Dear Hermione,

I know I haven't always treated you as well as I should have, but still, you are the one person I trust the most. I am sorry for not being able to protect you at the Ministry, and hope that you are still talking to me in spite of all the mess I've caused.

There are some things I haven't had time to tell you, most of all because I had to understand them first. These things are important, and I had to make some decisions because of them. That's why I was so unbearable for the last few days. If you knew what I know now, you'd understand.

Right now, I am on the run from the Order, and I have no one to turn to. I am keeping in motion, so that they can't track me, but I can't keep on running forever. I think I saw some glimpses of Order members when I had to change buses on my way to London.

I can't tell you where I am right now, but I am fine. Please, don't tell anyone you had contact with me, especially not the Leader of the Order. I know I am asking too much, but please trust me.

Please get to Kensington on the circle as fast as possible. Don't get on; just wait on the platform by the car nearest to the entry. I'll find you there, and will look for you all day. If you can't make it, please take care of Hedwig. I told her to stay with you until I can get her.

Your friend,

Harry

"Asking too much is spot on" she grumbled to herself. Still, he was her friend, and he seemed desperate. Not to mention that all that cloak and dagger stuff, as much as she seemingly opposed it in school, was her secret fancy. Why else would she always be right in the middle of it? She just didn't want anybody to know how much she liked it. Also, if someone like Harry asked for help, how could she not obey?

While she still was musing about how paperback-like this entire thing was, another part of her brain was already making plans and lists and checking data on how to help her friend. Getting to London

was easy. She would ride her bike or better, take a bus to High Barnet station and ride the tube down to London, but first, she should call her mother at the practice.

That was a bit away from Kensington station, but they could get there and get a ride back home, if it took longer. Anyway, her parents would get mad at her if she didn't call them about going to London.

She quickly dressed in her best jeans and one of her nicest shirts. It was a bit snug in places and dipped a little low, but Hermione had found it made her feel just a little bit sexier than her normal jumpers and zip-ups that she wore. After said quick call to her mother, she was out the door and on her way.

Something in the back of her mind was chastising her for not wearing a dress, like all the girls in such novels tended to wear, or at least a skirt, but her rational mind didn't fancy getting ogled by everyone all the way to London. She didn't think of herself as a stunning beauty, but sitting on the tube with a short skirt while alone was a sure way of getting unwanted attention.

'Not to mention the stuff that might be on the seats. Better some fabric between me and that.'

Near six p.m., and a long ride later, she was standing on the requested platform and watching the people come and go. The entire ride, she was in a kind of daze, the half-read novel still in her mind, with Harry's plight filtering into it. Just ten minutes into the ride she had started to use Harry to visualize the book's hero, and of course, she had taken the role of the heroine.

Yes, she was daydreaming, but hey, she was sixteen!

Of course, she knew it was irrational to want the Hero's portrayed in dime-novels that she bought from the grocers but like most girls, she couldn't let the dream of the perfect man go. Someone who was brave, who had a tragic past, who overcame so many obstacles, someone who had so much fame he could have his pick of women, yet would always choose her. He also had to be humble, kind and above all honest with her. She knew this man was entirely unrealistic.

At least it was not like her embarrassing crush on Lockhart, of all people, she reminisced. Lockhart had been so fitting for her fantasies, dashing and good looking, but then he turned out to be a fraud. She never forgave him for that. She always wanted a hero, just like in her books.

Now Dumbledore was a real hero, but much too old. No amount of fantasy could make HIM attractive enough for a teenage girl.

Ok, Harry might fit. Sometimes, he showed a glimpse of the man he could be. Most of the time, though, he was a rather shy guy, she thought with a sigh. She could never stay with someone who didn't stand up to her. She wanted someone she could look up to - or at least at eye-level. Either way, that point was moot unless he finally noticed her as a girl, which wouldn't happen, anyway.

Of course, that thought caused her to reflect on her body and exactly what was at fault for not being attractive. Being a girl - and Hermione - she had an alphabetized index of her perceived imperfections.

Being that deep in thought, she nearly didn't notice her friend when the next train stopped. All the people rushed out and in, and at the last moment, he stepped off the train and stood in front of her. She had him in a hug before he could even say a word.

When she noticed that he held her only with one hand, her eyes fell on his trunk beside him.

"That bad?" was all she said.

"Worse. Please, let's get going; If we stay too long, we'll get visitors. Follow me," he answered, and was already in motion when he suddenly stopped once again. He turned to her and hugged her again, this time dropping his trunk and nearly crushing her.

"Thank you for coming. You're the only one I could trust. My smartest and prettiest friend." he whispered into her ear, not knowing what he did to her already primed subconscious. Pictures of hopes - long forgotten hopes - surged out of the depths of her mind to which she had banished them. Her mind went into overdrive.

'Did he just call me pretty? He hugged me - he never does that! Does this mean anything? Could it?'

In a daze, she followed him as he led her onto the street, bought some bus tickets, and helped her in. They sat in the back, while most of the people, their clothes outing them as tourists, were upstairs.

Roused from her trance by the jostling of the starting bus, she started in on him the instant they sat down.

"OK, Mr. Mysterious, what happened? Why did you run away? Why are you running from the Order? Why can't we go to Dumbledore? Is it about Sirius? Did you have a vision? Tell me!" She said, getting faster and louder with every question. She nearly shrieked at the end.

Of course, she noticed that Harry was closing up as soon as she asked the first question. He always reacted that way when put under pressure. Ron just ignored her or snapped back, but Harry shut down completely, and then gave in after a few minutes.

But this time it was different. Half way into lock down, his expression changed, and his face opened up again.

"Hermione, please, shut up for a moment and let me explain."

For a few seconds, she gaped at Harry. Normally, he caved in as soon as she started in on him, but now he had just cut her off. Harry was taking control? What happened?

Harry took a deep breath, and began to explain.

"Sorry for being rude, but I had to stop you. I don't know why, but every time you start in on me like that, I just freeze up inside. Sorry, but I can't stand it when you get like that. It's not against you, it... it... it's just that it reminds me of..." he started, but his words got stuck half way out and his eyes locked onto his shoes as he went silent.

To the world, he seemed to brood over something, but to Hermione it was obvious that he was fighting tears.

It was then, that Hermione finally noticed his face for the first time. Or better, the big bruise on his left cheek, and the split lip. She gasped as the implication hit her. She knew that there was only one place where he could have gotten it, since she last saw him with his family.

"Your uncle did that, didn't he?" she said softly, indicating his cheek.

He just nodded, still with a sad expression on his face, but now there was something more: A glint of anger firmly held in check.

She knew that he wouldn't want to talk about it right now, and tried to steer back on topic. He had said she reminded him of something, and that memory caused him to shut down on her. She had a suspicion she didn't like - not one bit - but she had to ask.

"Do I remind you of him?" she asked, her voice tentative and quiet.

Harry's head flew up, his eyes wide. "NO! Not my uncle! Never him!" he yelled, his eyes wide in panic.

"Of whom then?"

You could see in his face that he didn't want to tell her, but still, he knew she deserved an answer. His answer made her recoil and gasp into her hands.

"My aunt," he whispered, nearly too softly to hear. "She always has that tone when she talks to me. Always nagging, as if all I do is wrong. Always more work to do. And you have the same way of talking when you get that way. I'm sorry. I know you're usually right, but I just can't get her out of my mind when you talk like that. I am so sorry." He was close to tears when he finished, and dropped his head into his hands, hiding his face.

Hermione was shocked. She sometimes reminded him of a person he hates? Immediately, her mind began analysing their history. And to her shame, she found he was right.

When they talked, she usually nagged or bullied, and most of the times she tried to make him do some work. Did he slack a bit with his homework? Yes, but it was only logical that he did enjoy having

a little spare time, given that all he did as child was chores. Yes, Hermione considered learning to be great fun, but she knew that she stood alone in that opinion.

Back in fourth year, Ron left him, leaving her as his only companion. And what did she do with him? Read books in the library. Did she ever play a game with him? Or just take a walk and talk with him? No, she just urged him on to work more. That was to keep him alive, it's true, but it wouldn't have killed them if she had granted them a short reprieve and some fun now and then, to relieve the pressure he was under.

At that moment, Hermione realized that she had no clue how to be a real friend. She knew Harry better than anybody, but she didn't ever take the time to really get to know him. His hopes, his dreams, his fears, all that stuff. And now he sat there, worried about having hurt her - his friend, the one person he turned to when he didn't know where to go. She always wondered why he never noticed her 'that way'. Now she knew: Her thrice-damned nagging! She could curse herself! But that could wait. Now, she must make things right!

Slowly, she reached out, touched his hands, and then retreated, waiting for him to look at her. When he finally turned to face her, he saw her teary eyes and opened his mouth to apologise again, but she stopped him with her free hand, placing her index finger on his lips. "Don't. I have to apologise, too. I haven't been that good a friend, I know."

At this, he tried to retort, but she hushed him with a smile and a shake of her head.

"Yes, I have been there for you, but I always egged you on. I knew you were always working at home and never had any spare time. Still, every time you relaxed, I nagged you to work. I never really did anything resembling fun with you, and frankly, I don't know how to. I know it's no excuse, but I grew up alone, without friends, and along the way, I guess I forgot how to have fun. Thank you for making me realize that; I promise to do better," she pledged, willing him to understand she would change. For him.

"I'll even write it into my study schedule," she added with a small smile, "5 o'clock - spontaneous fun." Harry's snort showed her shot

for levity had hit, so she continued, trying to keep her voice calm and warm. "As much as I hate to go back on topic, I fear we have to. Will you please tell me what happened?"

He nodded, took a deep breath, and shot her that lopsided smile that was the number one topic in every girl's loo and dorm at Hogwarts. Well, number two actually, but most girls didn't comment on the rest his body much when Hermione was around to hear.

"Thank you, it's easier if you ask that way. You remember that the Order had a chat with Vernon at the platform?"

Naturally she did, having been a part of the group that had accosted Vernon. After her confirming nod, he continued, while her eyes grew wider and wetter at his words.

"It backfired. I was not even through the door when he hit me. Full power and right in the face. It nearly threw me into the wall. And he would still be hitting me right now - I can read him well enough to know how much will follow. I had to do something."

"So you ran away?"

"No, I hit him back."

Immediately, she sat up straight. "You what?" she yelled at him, but quickly quieted as he cringed. Her face immediately showed her remorse. "Sorry! You surprised me. Please continue."

When Harry started to tell her, it was as though a dam had burst. First, he recounted the latest events, then his treatment at the hands of the Dursleys over the years: all the ridicule, his incarceration under the stairs, and the beatings. It was like all that pressure heaped upon had reached a critical point and he was unable to confine it anymore; it made him spill out his deepest secrets. Once he had started to confide in her, he was simply unable to stop, not even noticing that he had been talking for nearly an hour.

He told her about his conclusion about the Ministry's fight and his decision to fight fire with fire, calling it the 'grey' approach, and finished his purge with his theory of the mighty puppeteer in the castle orchestrating all this events for some reason, then fell silent. Hermione sat silent, too, worrying her lower lip. Harry was too

exhausted by then to do anything resembling even a slight panic, so he just sat and watched her think.

"So you think Professor Dumbledore set you up all the time?" She asked.

Harry sighed. "I do think so. He placed me with the Dursleys and left me there without ever looking after me. And remember first year, he used the Mirror of Erised to hide the Philosopher's Stone in. The mirror he knew I had seen; which he placed down there after I had found it. I'm not sure anymore if he hasn't somehow made me stumble across it. Then those traps - they were easily beaten by first-years. And what did he say to you when you went to get him while I was down there?"

Hermione leaned her head to the left as she tried to remember that specific incident. It was so long ago, but she could still remember it clearly. Yes, she remembered that she had run into Dumbledore shortly after leaving Fluffy's room. In fact, it seemed like he was heading there already.

Harry nearly laughed out loud as her eyes bulged out of her head when she finally recalled the words.

"He knew where you were, and who was with you! He knew Voldemort would be there!" she cried, horrified at the implications.

"And in second year, he knows everything going on in the castle, but he doesn't notice a truck-sized snake? What about the teachers he hires? Binns is dead, Quirrell had Voldemort attached to his head, Lockhart was a fraud, Moody was a disguised Death Eater, Umbridge tortured students, and the Muggle Studies teacher is said to be a pureblood that has never even seen a muggle let alone met one." Harry rattled off names, the pile of Dumbledore's more obvious mistakes getting higher with each name he uttered.

"You know, he was not really in any position to deal with Umbridge," Hermione interjected half-heartedly.

"Maybe, but he could have intervened, at least. Those quills have been outlawed for centuries. Or Snape - I could get crucio-ed by Malfoy under his nose and he would probably give me detention and dock points for screaming in the hallways. Dumbledore never did

anything to rein in Snape - nor the Death Nibblers he grooms." Harry spat in disgust before taking a deep breath and soldiering on, his head hung low in sadness.

"But that's nothing compared to what I know now. He knew that prophecy. He told me the content. It says that I am destined to fight the Dark Lord. One of us will have to kill the other, or neither of us will be able to live. But still, he sent me to the Dursleys'. No training, just hiding me away. That's why I lived in a cupboard for years. It's all because of him!" Harry had actually yelled the last word, and started to sob again.

He jerked back upright as he heard her gasp, just in time to be embraced by her arms and squeezed tightly. At first he stiffened, as he never really knew how to deal with human touch, but it wasn't at all like a Molly-hug. The Weasley matron's hugs were restricting, incarcerating, and stifling. This was different. It was more... mutual was the word that came to mind. It gave him the feeling that she clung to him for her comfort as much as for his. It was a mere offer of comfort to draw from the hug, while Molly's hugs ordered you to be calm, or face the consequences.

While he was experiencing the different kind of hug, Hermione was pondering a question. Well, more like a million of questions, simultaneously, but only a handful of them were present in her conscious mind.

First of all, why did it feel so good to hold him?

That, of course, led to some questions about their friendship, his looks, her looks, their friends, their ancestry, and families. That train of thought was rapidly quelled, and other thoughts battled for dominance.

Right now, the finale was between 'Did the Headmaster really set him up for all those things? And why did Dumbledore do all this to him?' and 'How can I help him?'

She threw first question back into the depths of her mind as she felt Harry relaxing into her hug. She trusted him, and that was all it took to take his side of the fence. But how could she help him? He said Order members were following him, so they must have a tracking

charm on him, but which one was it? She was in dire need of more input.

"Harry? I want to help you. Please, tell me about you being followed. How did that happen?"

"Whenever I stand still for a few minutes, they appear. They must have a tracking charm on me or something."

Hermione shook her head. "Impossible. Those do not work that way. They would give them a direction, but no means to pinpoint you precisely enough for Apparition or a Portkey. If they had a Blood Trace on you, it might work, but no one in the Order would stoop so low as to dabble in blood magic. That's borderline dark and..." Her lecture died down as she saw a speck of recognition in Harry's eyes.

"Dumbledore does. He knows blood magic." Harry replied. He remembered Dumbledore say that his protections were based on his blood. But right now, he didn't like Hermione's facial expression. She looked like she had bitten into a lemon, and a mouldy one at that. No, he did not like her expression at all.

"That's bad, isn't it?" Harry had to know, although he didn't want to.

Hermione shook her head and frowned. "Not that bad, it's just so unexpected that someone like Dumbledore would dabble in such an art. God damn it! We'll have to do the same if we want to counter it if he has."

While Harry still stared at her for cursing out loud, she quickly glanced around in the bus and read the tour plan. "OK, do you trust me on this?" she asked, and continued with a smile after he looked at her as if she were daft for questioning that and had only nodded in reply.

"The next stop that's good for us is in about in about 5 minutes. I'll get us to my mum's office and she'll drive us home, but first, I'll have to call her. Do what I say, and we'll be able to end that trace without casting any spells, okay?"

AN:

Since the first chapter was just a small teaser to get you guys hooked, I give you this chapter early.

Don't expect me to update every other day, I will try to stick to a weekly update, though.

As always, my heartfelt thanks to my betas, She-Who-Is-Hard-To-Spell (embirsiphonelilathia) and He-Who-Corrects (pfeil). Their help is invaluable.

Review (Thank you guys, does wonders for my confidence) replies:

I use British spelling (Can't have a strapping lad like Harry talk like a yank!), so don't wonder if you find some different vowels and the odd 'u' here and there.

Most wizards are rather set in their ways. Most wouldn't think that someone would just deck them instead of using a spell - after all, punching equals work. It's like a remote that doesn't work. Most would try to press the button harder a few times before considering the alternative of standing up.

And yes, my Harry had conjured a 'pair', but he's not going postal, at least not yet. Maybe never – that's for me to write and you to find out.

Enjoy,

LaCroix

Chapter 3: Bloody business

*** June 27th, late afternoon, a bus in London ***

As the bus came to a jostled halt at their stop, Hermione practically dragged the emotionally spent Harry onto the street after her, nearly forgetting Harry's trunk in the process. A short walk brought them to the next available telephone booth. Knowing that this would take a while and observing the old proverb 'better safe than sorry', Hermione told Harry to jog around the block to keep in motion while she made the call to her mother.

Although still rather spent from his hour-long exhausting emotional outburst in the bus, Harry obediently dropped his trunk besides her and took off without a word. Hermione blushed from seeing his obvious blind trust in her. Pulling out some coins, she started to punch the numbers.

Harry returned while she was still trying to make her mother understand the urgency of the situation and thus the importance of leaving as soon as they arrive, without revealing too much critical information, yet. With a short series of hand waves, she signalled him to make the run a second time. Much to her relief, he didn't make a scene - in fact, he didn't even roll his eyes at her. Instead, he just nodded and went off again, even though it was terribly hot. Hermione shot him a brilliant smile for being so understanding.

After finally browbeating her mother into acceptance, Hermione hung up and waited for Harry to return. After fifteen minutes without the slightest sign of Harry, she became nervous. It hadn't taken him more than five minutes the last time.

'Shit!' Harry thought for the fifth time as he fidgeted from one leg to the other in the crowd. On his second lap, he had seen a red light ahead and chosen to take a turn to the left to keep moving. He noticed his mistake when he came to a stop in a dense crowd. The thrice damned road was too wide to be crossed in one go, so it had an in-between stop on the median, slowing him down

Turning everywhere, Harry nervously scanned the area for potential pursuers. 'How long does that stupid light take?' shot through his mind – he had to get moving!

"Bollocks!" he cursed softly, earning him a few disapproving glares from bystanders, when he noticed a fiery red, but slightly balding, shock of hair, behind him and across the street. He would recognize Arthur Weasley at a hundred paces, especially in his strange Sherlock Holmes style coat that Arthur found appropriate for the mid-nineties muggle London.

He would have missed the witch by his side, since she didn't look out of the ordinary, but as she elbowed Arthur and pointed at Harry, he recognized her. Her coat had misled him for a moment - the style, along with her long, black hair and pale complexion, meant he had taken her for a 'Goth'. When Arthur had to grab her arm to keep her from walking into the traffic to get him, he got definite confirmation.

Ignoring the glares and shouts of indignation, he jostled his way through the crowd, trying to put some kind of buffer between them and him. He thought he had heard Arthur shouting his name, but he didn't mind. All that did count was the light turning green.

When the light changed, he lunged out like a racehorse. The people from the opposite side made way as he charged at them like a mad bull. The shouts behind him told him that the Order was giving chase. Falling into his old habits from 'Harry hunting', when Harry spotted a newspaper kiosk with a postcard display, he quickly latched onto the opportunity that was provided as he darted past the booth.

The crash of the falling display - the spread of cards all over the ground and the shouts - were like music in his ears. A quick glance over his shoulder brought a smile on his face. Arthur had the witch clinging to him after she had slipped on the loose cards. Their stumble gave him a bit more of a lead.

A block later, though, they'd almost caught up, since Harry had to slow down. He had already started puffing from the first run around the block, and the sharp tempo of the current chase was hard to keep up.

He dashed across the next street, and, glancing around, made a sharp turn to the right, crossing the next street as well. The loud ring of a protesting tramway was music in his ears as he cleared the tracks with less than ten feet to spare. Harry knew it hadn't been the smartest move - he could practically hear Hermione's protests in his mind - but he figured it had been slowing down for the station

anyway, so he had decided to take the chance. His quick decision had been a good one, paying off right away as he gained another half a block in his escape before his pursuers finally rounded the tram.

He realised this move had evened out his chances as he took another quick look back over his shoulder. Arthur Weasley was bent over, hands on his knees and gasping for air. He looked near a coronary and was panting as he remained stationary after only a half a block more of running. His age had apparently come to bite him in the arse. The woman, however, worried him: even though her cheeks were pink and she was breathing a little heavily, she was keeping up with him just fine.

'Yay me!' Harry thought. 'Just my rotten luck - the only jogger in the whole Order is chasing after me.'

It didn't take long, though, before he noticed she was gaining ground.

Puffing and tired, Harry desperately searched for a solution to his current dilemma. He briefly considered rounding on the woman and using his fists to halt her movements. The beginning of the stitches and aches that were forming in his body meant he decided against it, though. Besides that, the woman seemed rather fit and Harry was wary of discovering that she was indeed an Auror. That thought alone prevented him from making a rash decision, lest she wipe the street with him. Then he got a rather brilliant idea.

With his idea in mind, Harry took another bet and ran straight for the doors of a nearby shopping centre.

He dashed through the open doors and shoved his way through the crowd of people in front of him. His struggle caused him to slow only just a fraction and he expelled a breath in relief as he heard the sound of the automatic doors sliding shut behind him. As he continued his desperate run, he heard a loud thud that made him coast to a standstill, panting for air. If he had had some air left in his lungs, he would have laughed quite loudly at the sight of the witch sprawled on the ground just outside the shattered, but still mostly intact, security glass doors of the shopping centre. Harry shook his head; every muggle child knew those doors didn't open fast enough for runners.

Pressing a hand to his throbbing left side, he fell into a jog and crossed the centre, heading for the exit to the next street he could see in the distance.

Hermione was quite distressed when there was still no sign of Harry after twenty minutes of waiting. At first, she had only been worried that they might be late getting to her mum's practice, but now she was wearing a groove into the ground next to the telephone booth. She nearly jumped out of her skin when someone suddenly grabbed her shoulder from behind.

She turned with a screech, only to yell her attacker's name as she took a hold of Harry. He looked like he would collapse any moment, sweat pouring off him in streams.

"What the hell happened?" she asked as she helped him to a seat on his trunk. He shook his head and stood, weakly.

"Order members... nearly... got...me," he panted, still too wound up to talk. He opened his trunk and stripped his shirt off, dabbing the sweat off his face and chest. Hermione's eyes were drawn to the sight before her and she couldn't help but notice that it was a rather nice chest. No hair to be seen and the muscles seemed well defined against his skin. She nearly pouted with a sigh of disappointment when Harry tossed the soaked shirt into his trunk and pulled a clean one out and over his head.

He slammed the trunk closed and lifted it, pulling Hermione along the street. Tugging on his arm, Hermione changed his course, leading him in the opposite direction.

Soon, Hermione had navigated them to her mum's Kensington practice, which was located in a very well off street. Seeing that spotless house and the surroundings, Harry would have wondered how a dentist could afford such a place if Hermione hadn't explained it to him.

Apparently, her mum, while starting off in a hospital, had become a specialist for cosmetic dentistry, and well known for her work among the better-offs. She had told him that her mother often hinted that even some people she knew from the telly owed their shiny white regular smiles to her mother, although she was far too professional

to ever mention names. Most of them were regulars with her, and valued her for that privacy.

Naturally, Hermione had a secret list of names, which she had compiled from her mother's reaction to some stars, but she didn't share it with Harry, citing that she wouldn't dare throwing a spanner in her mother's works, since her book supply depended on that money.

According to Hermione her father didn't work at the same practice her mum did. Apparently her mum's practice was more of a niche thing, where you had to be specially trained and while it paid well, not a lot of people needed the service in the first place. Her mum only booked enough patients for one dentist so it worked out rather well for her, even though the work could be very sporadic. Her father, on the other hand, worked as one of the senior dentists and oral surgeons at a High Barnet Dental Clinic. He worked more hours and didn't make as much money, but it was steady income and that was all he really cared about.

Hermione again sent Harry around the block as she rang the bell and went in to get her mum. This time, thankfully, he only had to circle once before he saw Hermione waving from next to a parked car. Harry knew that a dentist was well off, but that car spoke volumes. Growing up with the Dursleys, he didn't know a lot about car types, except for the company cars Uncle Vernon had, but he knew what a Mercedes was and that 'big' meant 'really expensive' in that line of cars.

Hermione informed him that his trunk was already in the boot. Harry nodded his head and watched in amusement as Hermione daintily manoeuvred her way into the front seat of the car; noting that Hermione's mother apparently brought out a different side of his friend. With a soft chuckle and shake of his head, he got into the car with decidedly less grace than Hermione, his breathing still heavy from running in the heat. He immediately sighed in bliss when he felt the air condition wash over him.

As soon as he was inside, the car started moving. Hermione turned around from the front seat and began introductions. "Mother, this is Harry Potter. Harry, this is my mum, Dr. Dr. Margret Granger."

Harry was a bit unsure about the title but he turned to the woman and received a shock at seeing his best friend all grown up. Clearing his throat he greeted the older woman, "Hello, ah, Doctor-Doctor Granger?" He was still a little stunned and he studied the woman's face. If there ever was a spitting image, then Hermione and her mum were it. There were a few differences to notice, though. Her mother's hair was lighter and seemed a little more tamed; he assumed this was due to age and a good hairdresser. Their faces were identical; they even shared the same eye colour. The only thing that would help you tell them apart was the slight wrinkles near the eyes and mouth of Hermione's mother that showed her age. All and all Harry had to say that if genetics were proven right, Hermione would age rather gracefully.

"Yes, dentistry and English literature, but you can call me Mrs. Granger, ok? Nice to finally meet you, Harry! We just saw each other once in passing, and I didn't have a chance to get to know the boy behind the stories," came her friendly answer, stressing the word 'finally' in a very obvious way, while Hermione blushed deep red.

Before Harry could ask why, Margret continued talking. "So, what's up with you both, all that cloak and dagger stuff? The cloak I could understand, with Hermione owning at least half a dozen by now, but why the daggers? Sounds just like one of those novels that Hermione reads."

As Hermione's blush deepened, Harry decided to definitely ask about that topic later and to really like her mother. It was rather fun to talk to her. "Well that dagger is currently aimed at my back right now and I'd rather like to dodge it, you understand," he jokingly replied, infected by her merry way of talking.

He could see her raise an eyebrow in the rear mirror at his statement before she turned towards her daughter. "Honey, talk!" she demanded - the tone of her voice suggested that Hermione didn't have a choice and any backtalk would neither go ignored nor be appreciated.

Hermione, despite still blushing madly, started explaining at once. "Well, Harry here has been forced to live with some relatives of him since his parents were killed when he still was a child. The problem is, is..."

"They hate me," Harry came to her aid. "They hate the fact that I was born. They made me do all the housework, fed me scraps and hit me whenever they..." He couldn't complete the sentence, as the car made a sharp jerk and nearly collided with another because Margret had actually turned around to look at him in horror for a second. Horns were blaring loudly as the other drivers expressed their disapproval of her driving style.

"They did what?" she inquired exasperatedly, this time only looking at Harry via the mirror, after she had steadied the car again.

"They hit me. Or they locked me in, in the cupboard I lived in – AAARH!" Once again, the car had swerved into another lane as Margret lost and regained control over the car. This time, the much louder horn of a lorry sounded, and Harry would swear that there were only fractions of an inch left as they passed it.

"Maybe we should have this talk later", Harry offered, cautiously, while Hermione slowly unclenched her hands from the dashboard, panting. He had no problem dying in a blaze of glory, maybe taking Voldemort or a Death Eater with him, but to do so in the backseat of a car - even a Mercedes - wasn't high up on his list. Well, unless there was some cute girl with him and her father was the reason for his untimely death...

For now, it was Margret's turn to blush. "Sorry, maybe we should stop for a while to talk," she granted.

"NO!" came the immediate combined yell from Harry and Hermione. This time, Margret jerked towards the left and a tire scraped on the pavement, giving a noisy screech. The following cars increased the safety distance even more than they already had.

"We can't stop, Mum! When we stop, they'll come to get Harry. He's been on the run the whole day, and whenever he stops, the Headmaster tries to catch him. He's tracking Harry," Hermione launched an explanation before her mother could chastise her, choosing to omit to mention the breakneck chase through London. She didn't think her mother would approve.

"Your Headmaster's tracking him? Why is a runaway his business?" Margret had expected the police being after Harry, not his school

teachers. That was why she had been so hard to persuade to help Harry when Hermione had called.

"It isn't, but he has decided that he is allowed to control my life. He placed me in that house; he even has it guarded so I don't leave it. Those guards don't help me against my uncle, of course - they just make sure I don't leave until Dumbledore says so."

"But why does he do that?" Margret was confused. If Harry told the truth, which was supported by Hermione's lack of corrections, that was highly unusual, if not outright illegal.

"There is a prophecy that I - and I alone - can kill the Dark Lord Voldemort, because I have a power he has not. It's him or I, and Dumbledore plays his games to make it happen. It's all for the greater good, so I don't count."

"It's him or me, Harry. Not him or I," Hermione huffed. "Anyway, I can't disagree with the rest of your statement."

"Sorry", Margret interrupted, not being able to follow his explanation anymore. "But didn't you kill him already? Hermione told me that story about your parents and him, how you defeated him to become the 'Boy Who Lived' and all that. I think I remember she said you killed him back then."

"That didn't count, somehow. Actually, I already killed him twice now - he came back in our second year through that diary - but I destroyed it before he was back fully. But he was reborn last year, with the help of my blood."

"Harry! Your blood!" Hermione interrupted. "He used your blood to regain his body!"

"What do you mean? Oh, you think that might interfere with the blood wards Dumbledore has placed on Privet Drive?" Harry stated, thinking he had gotten her hint.

For a few seconds, Hermione's eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets. "Blood wards! Oh my God, Merlin! That's so, so, so... ARGHHHH!" She finished her sentence in a frustrated screech and stomped her feet on the floor.

"Hermione Jean! Don't do that while I drive!" her mother yelled as she tried to steady the car again after her jerking, which made Hermione duck her head, and mumble an apology, but didn't quell her temper much.

"Incredible? Brilliant?" Harry offered, only to be silenced by a sharp glare.

"No! Reprehensible, brutal, and evil! Don't you know what blood wards do?" she spat, falling back into her pattern of pretending everybody knew as much as she did.

Harry rolled his eyes at her, which made her back off. "No, I don't, and I believe 90 percent of all wizards and witches don't, either. So, what did he do to me this time?"

Hermione blushed again, this time from embarrassment. Harry secretly wondered how often a person could blush and recover in a row without hurting something.

His musings were interrupted as she started to explain, meekly. "Sorry, I was just angry that he would do such a thing. In layman's terms, normal wards draw their power from ambient magic. The longer they sit unopposed, the stronger they get. Places like Hogwarts or the Ministry have such strong wards because they sit in very magical places and have many wizards within them. Every time someone casts magic, they get to soak up some of it after it has run its course."

"So Hogwarts is so well warded because a few hundred children charge it day and night?" Harry summarized her tangent.

"Yes. And it's built on a very magical site - the Forbidden Forest is an enormous source of wild magic," she added.

"Ok. And why are blood wards so evil?" Harry tried to steer her back on topic, and was not feeling any better when Hermione appeared to be getting sick when he mentioned them.

"They briefly covered blood magic in Ancient Runes, since Professor Babbling is the leading expert on runes and sometimes departs from the usual curriculum when she knows some interesting tidbit about

the use of a certain rune," Hermione babbled, then noticed the annoyed glance Harry gave her.

"She is fair enough that these never come up at a test," she added with a reproaching look at Harry, who had the good grace to blush at his thoughts being read so easily.

With a last huff at the boy, Hermione continued. "I read up on them a bit, since it is fascinating - the runic part of it, at least. While normal wards are powered actively on creation, and then strengthen by minuscule amounts over time, blood wards, or more precisely wards which do have someone bound to them by blood, take their energy from the bound person. They drain him to strengthen. No wonder that he thinks they're as strong as the school wards. If you were powering them for so many years, they must be incredible." She told them, but suddenly sat up straighter and looked at him.

"Did he bind you already to them this summer?" she asked warily.

Harry gave her his 'what are you talking about' look. "Ah, no - he says I'm always connected to them, I just have to show up there to charge them," he replied, getting her 'what are you talking about' raised eyebrow as reply.

"That's impossible. If you were already bound, you should be magically drained because of that. When you told me that V..." - she stumbled over the name, but got it on the second try - "Voldemort used your blood to regain his body, I assumed that's why you had gained this stronger connection to him." She explained what she had intended to say, before she had one of her 'Hermione moments', getting more and more agitated and shrieking statements, as unwelcome thoughts and conclusions flooded her brain.

"But the blood wards should suck you dry! They used that as a punishment for people in older days, it made them practically squibs! But at school, you can still cast magic!"

"Maybe it's the distance, or Dumbledore did something so I'm not completely drained?" Harry said, offering some explanations to her, before taking the coward's way out and changing the topic. At least he changed it back to the point at hand. "What can we do about that trace?"

"Oh, yes, that." She blushed, looking guilty that she had gone off on a tangent again. "There is a ritual that was used to end such a punishment; it creates a ward to block all blood magic from nursing from you. That makes all blood bindings collapse if held long enough, so that blood trace of Dumbledore would fade, too."

"Can we do this while running or here in the car?" Harry interjected. "I'd hate to be caught while doing that."

Hermione flinched lightly. "No, we need more space for that, somewhere you can lie down," she said, her face dropping slightly for some reason. "But once it starts, you're safe from tracking. It just needs some time to be permanent."

"That sounds great," Margret rejoined the conversation, happy to finally understand more than every other word. "But how does someone know when it's been long enough?"

The sudden tears shining in Hermione's eyes made Harry aware of the answer before she vocalized it.

"That's easy. It's done when he stops screaming."

A long silence followed while everyone absorbed that news. Finally, Harry broke the silence with two words.

"How long?"

These words were said calm and calculating, as though he were speaking about the length of an essay.

While Margret gasped at his casual acceptance of screaming in pain, Hermione did a quick calculation, blanched, and refused to meet his face.

"I can't do this to you!" she cried, and started to sob silently. Margret was looking rather helpless, putting her hand at her distressed daughter's shoulder to calm her, a move Harry copied. A few moments of softly petting her upper arm later, Harry tried to wheedle it out of her.

"Hermione, please, how bad will it be?"

"The books say it is as bad as a Cruciatus Curse. And it took several minutes for someone who was bound to wards for less than a year! I would have to look it up, but it could be hours!" she whined, and then turned to look at him.

"I can't do that to you, Harry, I won't! If it just were the trace, it would be fine, but the trace, the wards, and whatever Riddle did to you - it's too much, I can't do that to someone I love!" she yelled at him, tears streaming freely from her eyes, before she curled up, again.

Though Harry was already pondering his fate and missed her last statement, Margret hadn't and filed that blurt away for later examination. Her incentive to help, and that probably in more than one area, invigorated, she threw a thought into the discussion.

"What if I give Harry some drugs?"

Both teens suddenly stared at her, not really understanding what she meant. Margret chuckled at them, shaking her head.

"No, I'm not a drug dealer," she joked. "I meant to anaesthetize Harry. Although Morphine is a close relative to Heroine, it's a very strong painkiller that I prescribe sometimes after extensive oral surgery. Depending on the dosage, you could get run over by a truck and find it rather pleasurable," she told them with big smile on her face.

"I have some in the practice. We could go back and fetch some right now, since I believe time is of the essence," she offered.

Harry shrugged and did as he usually did when there was some decision to make he knew nothing about.

"What do you think, Hermione? Would that work?" he asked his brilliant friend.

Worrying her lower lip - something Harry always had thought was very cute - Hermione went through all the things she knew about wizards and muggle drugs. "They used that on me after surgery when I had my arm broken and they had to screw it back together, didn't they, mum?"

"Yes, Honey. The other stuff didn't work on you at all, but it did the job. They had to dose you rather heavily, but it worked," her mother replied, before adding, "Maybe you Magicals are resistant to anaesthetics?"

"I don't want to, nor do I think I could, knock Harry completely out, but it should take the worst edge off," she concluded her case.

Both Margret and Harry waited while Hermione's brain worked out a solution to the problem. Equations were drawn up and solved, arguments made and shredded and all the cogs and wheels worked at their highest speed. They both knew the signs of Hermione being deep in thought and knew better than to interrupt her when in that state. The results were rarely pretty.

"Ok, the bad news first: It'll still hurt, Harry, badly, and for hours," Hermione warily told him, not being able to look at him while telling, lest she would fall apart and cry. To her, being in pain was something rare, and she couldn't comprehend Harry's acceptance to that. Of course, she wasn't raised in an environment with people liable to afflict a good whack or two on you just because you looked at them the wrong way.

"I don't want to inflict that kind, no, any kind of pain on you, but if you want to be free, it's the only way," she concluded, hoping that he understood that there was no other way to do this.

Without procrastinating, Harry nodded his acceptance. "I know you don't like to, but I have to do it. Thank you for helping me." He said, reaching forward to brush against her arm lightly. Margret made another mark on her mental checklist when Hermione flinched lightly at his touch, without removing her arm from the contact.

"Do it, mum!" she said, briefly wondering why her mother had smiled strangely at her while Margret set the index and changed lanes. Harry asked a follow-up question, distracting her from that line of thought.

"You said bad news first. What's the good news?"

He had seen Hermione in lots of moods, happy, sad, angry, enthusiastic, and even hopping mad - an emotion usually displayed while she was in a fight with Ron about something or the other. He

had even seen her furious enough to punch Malfoy in the face, nearly knocking the stupid bastard out - a memory he would cherish for the rest of his life. But he never, ever, would have thought her capable of smiling such a sadistic smile.

"Remember a certain scar? To whom are you connected, again?" Hermione said with a smirk on her face.

AN:

Let me tell you, I was squealing like a cheerl... - I mean I was coolly leaning back in my stuffed armchair, nipping my port wine smugly - when I noticed that some of my favourite Authors had alerted and reviewed me. Thank you.

On the other hand, I am now terribly nervous that my meager skills fall short of their expectations.

So I hope for the best and watch out for their opinion and in one case, my back nervously...

Picture-book case of 'be careful what you wish for...'

As always, my heartfelt thanks to my betas, She-Who-Is-Hard-To-Spell (embirsiphonelilathia) and He-Who-Corrects (pfeil). Without their help, I would be cowering in a corner now, too afraid to upload...

To all the reviewers that liked the chapter:

Thank you. You make this worthwhile.

Casually mentioned, there are minion application forms on the table next to the door; I'm looking for some expendable human shields for the prior mentioned reasons. Board and lodging provided, small allowance and only irregular beatings.

Back on topic – yes, there are many hints that there was lots of 'guidance' provided. From molly asking for the platform number to Ginny wearing some kind of perfume Harry could smell across the corridor... I love that, it provides ample opportunity to burrow my claws in for various fictions.

canoncansodoff:

The book - we will see it again, oh yes, we will... But this book was the inspiration for the fic. I found the book in a supermarket while I was bored and waiting at the register. I opened it and found a certain quote in there, and then I remembered a scene in HBP... Wait and see...

Darkheart81:

Well, I know some girls who were like Hermione, and all turned out to be kinky. Sweet memories... Don't worry, I don't write porn, but this is a story about a 16 year old and a 17 year old who were raised in the muggle world, and I rated it M...

Progress: I have nearly finished the fic now and it looks like it will have about 25 chapters, 18 of them ready and packaged for beta.

So rejoice, and hang on for the ride...

Chapter 4 - Eviction notice.

*** June 27th, 1996, late afternoon, northern London ***

Harry's happy smile lasted all the way back to the surgery and out to High Barnet. It only lessened slightly as he ran around the block to stay in motion while the Granger's went to get their stuff. The thought of getting even with old Tommy-boy was too enticing to worry about the downside.

By some unspoken agreement, the conversation in the car was kept light - school stuff, classes, and such. Again, Harry marvelled at how much he had done with Hermione by his side; there was virtually no adventure in which she didn't play a part. Ron did miss his fair share, but Hermione was always there. She even managed to help him while petrified!

Finally, they approached the Granger residence, a nice cottage in a small clearing in the woods. It was a mock Tudor style detached house that looked like it had once been two Semis before someone had remodelled it into one house. The house and the gardens certainly had style.

Hermione dashed into the house to carve some runes as she had explained to them while Margret took Harry for a ride through the countryside. They had at least an hour to kill, by Hermione's orders.

Harry had switched to the front seat and continued chatting with Margret. She was easy to talk to, and soon she had him telling her all the adventures he had been through at Hogwarts from his perspective - which of course highlighted Hermione's achievements and gave a completely different angle than her tales.

They really hit off, but Harry's initial joy at talking to that nice person he pegged Margret to be evaporated as she switched topic half an hour into the ride.

"What's going on between you and Hermione?"

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, not really knowing what she referred to.

"Harry, I don't like to beat around the bush, so I'll be blunt." She stated, and Harry gulped, certain that this was not going to be a conversation he wanted to have.

"I believe that you will be staying with us, and will probably leave with us when we leave for our holiday to this year, too. You will be around Hermione all the time and I'll have to trust you both. Although both of you might deny it if I asked, I still can see that you are more than just friends - and don't worry, I approve," she said grinning at him, making Harry wonder what the hell she was hinting at.

"You are both over or nearly over the age of consent, and I think you both would be good for each other, but you are her first boyfriend, Harry. Don't deny it, you are, even though neither of you have realized it, yet," she said matter-of-factly as Harry tried to object. "Just don't hurt her, please."

With that, as if nothing had happened, she was back to the former, jovial Margret he knew and was happily talking about the oncoming holiday and how they need to get a passport, tickets, and room for him as well, while Harry was still stunned and processing, making a rather good goldfish imitation on the passenger seat.

When they returned to the Granger property, he saw Hermione already wearing a groove into the front step.

As they stopped and got out, she practically hurled herself into Harry's arms, sobbing. While he held her, he was now, no thanks to Margret, acutely aware of the fact that his best friend was a girl - a shapely one, at that. While he was still fighting the blush and other responses, Hermione jumped back and grabbed his hand. Neither of them noticed Margret grin in the background.

While he didn't mind her hand in his, the fast jog out onto the street was not what he wanted to do now. While his mind wondered why his intentions for the summer suddenly included hugs and holding hands, he was brought back into this world by Hermione's panting voice.

"OK, lets make this quick. I have made a silver plate, engraved with the runes to start the ritual. All you have to do is sit there, I'll cut you and let some blood drop onto the runes and tap them with my wand

to activate them. When it's all done, I have to tap them again to disconnect you."

After coming to a stop and drawing some deep breaths, she turned them back to her house.

"Mum will give you the morphine as soon as you're ready. She'll have to do it before I cut you, though, since trying to safely inject it while you're thrashing about wouldn't be very safe. After that, it'll be just a quick cut, and then I activate the runes. Don't worry Harry; the morphine will kick in quickly, okay?" She babbled nervously. Harry couldn't help but notice that it seemed she was keener on convincing herself that everything would be fine than on convincing him. He could easily recognize the tone of panic in her voice and the way she talked. He gave her hand a supporting squeeze as they ran back to the house.

Both came back into the garden, and she led him and her mother back behind the house where a roll of tape and an upside-down silver plate covered in runes were sitting on a garden table in the middle of the terrace. A sunbed right next to it completed the scene. Hermione had all prepared. After a quick hushed conversation, Mrs. Granger had put her stuff onto the table as well, and in no time had drawn up the injection. She only paused for a moment when she noticed the plate.

"This is all?" Harry asked. "You said it would be a ritual."

"Honestly, Harry! What did you expect? Five people chanting around a pentagram?" Hermione huffed as she led Harry to the sunbed-slash-makeshift stretcher, and pushed him down on it.

"Well it is a bit anticlimactic, honey," her mother said as she started to duct-tape Harry's arms to the armrests for safety reasons. "Harry might have hoped for the sacrifice of a virgin or something," she said innocently as she stood and went to fetch the syringe.

"Mother! It was used to imprison people - sacrificing a virgin at each release would prove a bit impractical, don't you think? And it has runes and blood of a wizard - that qualifies it to be called a ritual!" Hermione ranted, covering her blush with her indignation. When Mrs. Granger re-approached with the syringe, Hermione offered Harry a bundled up t-shirt.

"You should bite on that; if the morphine doesn't work well enough it will prevent you from biting yourself." She hesitantly grabbed the small scalpel her mother had laid out, and looked at Harry, tears rolling freely down her cheeks, while Margret swabbed his arm and inserted the needle.

"You don't have to do it, w-we can still stop now. I don't want to hurt you," she pleaded with an obvious catch in her voice as she sat on the sunbed next to Harry.

Harry pondered his fate a last time. It was either 'do this to be free and maybe die trying' or to go back to Dumbledore and be frog-marched into his death, that much he was sure of, even through the slight fuzzy feeling caused by the drug entering his blood stream.

'Gryffindors charge ahead!' he remembered, and knew instinctively that this meant something else at this moment as well. It might be his last chance to say something important.

While Margret pulled out the needle, and put some adhesive tape over the wad she placed there, Harry told Hermione to come closer, sat up as much as he could and gently kissed Hermione on her cheek. "I know. I love you. Please do it, Hermione," he said; a slight slur in his voice as he dropped limply back into his seat.

He managed a last nod towards Margret, who caressed his cheek and carefully took the gag from Hermione's limp hand to put it into Harry's mouth as his eyes were already glazing over. Hermione, looking slightly stunned at his proclamation, took a deep, hitched breath and sliced his thumb before she took the plate from the table and traced the runes with his blood while sobbing silently.

As soon as she had finished the sixth and last rune, she placed the plate back on the table and tapped the activation rune with a shaky wand. Instantly, a glowing light sprang into life around him. Harry arched his back, throwing Hermione off and to the ground. A muffled yell escaped the gag and didn't stop. They watched on in horror as the plate began to heat up, burning a hole through the plastic table and falling onto the stones below with a loud clank. Hermione could see scorch marks beginning to form around the plate as it started glowing brightly. All the while, Harry was thrashing on the makeshift stretcher, his body buckling and heaving as he straining against his

restraints, his fingers turning white from clenching the armrests. The gag in his mouth may have been silencing his screams, but the contorted skin on his face told volumes about the pain he was experiencing.

"HARRY! NO!" Hermione yelled and stood to rush to him, but found herself pulled back into her mother's embrace, where she broke down sobbing while her mother cooed to her and stroked her head and back, telling her over and over that he would be alright.

*** June 27th, 1996, near midnight, Hogwarts castle ***

A visibly shaken Severus Snape was sitting in his office, not taking any notice of the present visitors, the Headmaster, or the Order members, downing a full tumbler of Firewhisky in one gulp. His sixth, if Dumbledore's count was correct.

"Severus, please, would you tell us what happened?" Dumbledore tried, again. Though the headmaster was persistent with his questioning, Severus was dead to the world. He had locked himself into his own mind, trying vainly to drown in the glass of whiskey in his hand. Every now and then, his body shuddered in revulsion.

*** About 4 hours earlier ***

Dumbledore was still trying to comprehend what had happened. Somehow, the Distanciaheadometer had broken down. The wheel had slowed and come to a standstill, indicating Harry had stopped again. Then, a few seconds later, the levitated pendulum just dropped to the base plate and the wheel stopped. Sadly, though, no coordinates appeared.

Pandemonium followed. People wanted to know what that meant. He would have told them, if only he knew. For all his age, he was never that good with enchanting or runes. His strength was casting and transfiguration, and could weave a common ward just fine, but that device was far above his knowledge. He would have to ask Professor Vector or Professor Babbling when they returned.

He checked a ward indicator for Privet drive and noticed that the wards were still active, which he took as a sign that Harry was still alive.

Just as a brainstorming session about what to do started, Severus hissed and grabbed his arm. The Dark mark was burning him, indicating that the Dark Lord was summoning him. He took his leave, and the rest of the Order feared for the worst.

Three and a half hours of listening to a wailing Molly Weasley later, the wards notified Albus that his Potion Master had returned. Much to his surprise, Severus did not return to the Head's Office, but went directly to his dungeon quarters.

Of course, the whole present Order migrated there, finding the Professor searching his office for something. Various jars and scrolls of parchment were scattered across the floor, and Snape was hip deep in a trunk, obviously an expanded one. He tossed a few parchments out over his shoulder and finally re-emerged with a bottle of Firewhisky in his hand.

Without ever noticing his visitors staring at him, he sank into a seat, grabbed a glass, and drew himself a large drink, downing it immediately and refilling the glass for another drink.

*** The present ***

Snape was shocked into consciousness by his other boss's voice. He longingly glanced at his glass, but decided it wouldn't make him feel any better. Nothing would.

"Severus! Please!"

The Potion Master sighed, and returned glass and bottle onto the table. When he looked up and at the crowd, the people recoiled in shock. No one had ever seen him like that. He didn't even sneer at them. He was completely unsettled, and tears were welling in his eyes.

When he finally started talking, it was with a broken, hollow voice.

"I was summoned by another Death Eater. When I was led into the Lord's chamber, I saw the Dark Lord writhing silently on the floor. I wondered about it briefly, until I was led closer and crossed a silencing charm."

"It was horrible. The Dark Lord was lying on the floor, convulsing, his skin boiling. And his screams, his screams!" he told them, shivering at the memory, rocking on his chairs for a few seconds.

"Horrible. I never heard anything like that. His snake was writhing in pain, too. She ended up dead as she bit herself but not before she exploded with another, unearthly scream. SNAKES DON'T SCREAM!"

He yelled the last sentence into the room, his eyes darting around wildly. Twitching lightly, he grabbed the glass again, and quickly downed the contents, but not before spilling some onto his lap due to his badly shaking hands. Albus moved quickly and took the bottle into his custody.

Snape tried to glare at him, but his heart wasn't really into it, so he continued after only a short break.

"They wanted... me... to tend to him, and threatened to kill me if I didn't, they even cursed me when I couldn't help him; but there was nothing I could do, his blood - it boiled! I couldn't do anything," he sobbed, before snatching the kneeling Dumbledore with his hands, pulling the man close.

"I don't even know what was happening to him! His muscles snapped - I could hear them! They were ripped off the tendons by their own cramping!" he shouted, shaking Albus by the shoulders.

"I was told that when it started, he was yelling at Potter to stop; it was Potter who was doing this to him! It finally stopped 10 minutes ago, and he fell unconscious. The present Death Eaters discussed what to do and sent me to get supplies. I left as quickly as I could, as they were bringing him to his Quarters... " he finished, and broke down and wept on Dumbledore's shoulder, his snot seeping into the expensive robes as he the Firewhisky and the horrors he had seen finally overwhelmed the man.

The Order members, sans Dumbledore, moved quickly out of the office, as they didn't want to witness the Potion Master's nervous break down. Since it didn't involve them or Harry directly, they didn't want anything to do with it, nor remember it.

Except for the twins, who pondered how to market the photographs they surreptitiously had made while Snape was weeping.

Before they had a chance to throw an impromptu party, a downtrodden Dumbledore left the office and joined them.

"Why so sad, Headmaster?" Diggle wondered. "This should be a time to celebrate!" Many others agreed heartily with this.

"Before we start to party, I do think we have some pressing things to discuss in my office. It would not do for wrong ears to overhear them." the Headmaster replied, and left for his chambers.

As soon as the Order had assembled in said room, Dumbledore sank into his seat and massaged his head.

"What's wrong, Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked. It had been a long time since she had seen that man in such a mood. The other people assembled shared her confusion; didn't they just hear the best news since 1981?

"It seems that I have failed once again," Dumbledore sighed. Meeting the now outright gaping member's eyes, he nodded, and continued.

"As you certainly remember, Tom Riddle grew to what he had become right under my nose. I saw the signs, but I ignored them and did not take action, believing the best and hoping that he might be turned from the evil path he had taken. When I finally recognized that this hope was futile, he had already grown too strong to thwart him."

His audience nodded at his words, the story well known to them.

"Now, in my blind trust in the good in people, I have repeated that mistake. I failed Mr. Potter."

"Headmaster! What are you playing at?" Molly interrupted.

"Mr. Potter has seen his share of evil in the world, and some has been due to my mistakes. I did place him with his relatives in order to nurture the protection his mother gave to him, but since then I

have learned that those relatives treat him less than adequately, which I failed to correct." the old wizard told them.

"In Hogwarts, he soon proved to be a capable wizard, but to my everlasting shame, I failed to protect him, even directly under my nose. In his first year, he was forced to fight a troll and kill a man, Professor Quirrell, who was a vessel for Voldemort back then."

The old man ignored all gasps, and went on with his tale, telling them about Harry's problems while being accused of being Slytherin's heir, his fight against a basilisk, the second killing of Riddle, the Dementor attacks, and the story of the Triwizard Tournament. He did not pause at Molly's wails when he described the resurrection and the following duel with Voldemort, neither.

"And then I made my worst mistake. Last year, I was afraid Voldemort might try to use their connection to possess Harry in my presence to attack me. Therefore, I ceased all contact to young Harry, for his own protection. But it seems that this, along with my failure to keep him safe from Madame Umbridge's torture, might have finally been too much. And the shock dealt by the loss of his godfather seems to have made Harry choose a darker path."

"Nonsense, Albus!" McGonagall chided, "Mr. Potter would never do anything like that. You must be mistaken!" Others, especially Molly and Remus, voiced their agreement.

"I once ignored a Dark Lord in the making, and I won't repeat this mistake, again. Also, we know that Lord Voldemort has managed to return from the dead already, so even if he dies from whatever Mr. Potter did to him, I believe that he might do this again. Either way, we must find Mr. Potter and return him to his home where he will be safe, and make sure he will be treated well there. It might not be too late to help Mr. Potter back on the right path."

***June 29th, 1996, Granger residence ***

It was early morning in High Barnett when Harry woke up. He remembered having a strange dream about Sirius. They had been together in what seemed to be a topless bar or at least he had hoped so, though the stairs in the background seemed to indicate something else, which he chose to ignore. Still, they were sitting there together and drinking quite happily. Sirius had a half-naked girl

on each arm and Harry couldn't help but smile at his uncle's drunken proclamation stating that if he'd known the afterlife was this good he may have sought out his crazy cousin much sooner.

There was also a strange crying ugly baby, but some nubile young lady and tossed it out of the door in disgust.

Of course, Sirius had agreed fully with Harry that he should start taking his life in his own hands. "A man can only find his destiny if he walks in his own shoes; following someone else's footsteps won't bring you ahead!" Sirius had proclaimed.

Those memories instantly faded when he tried to rub his eyes. His groan of agony was answered by a heartfelt "Good morning", spoken by an unknown male voice.

Trying to make out the owner, Harry turned his head, only to be immersed in a sea of pain once again.

"Don't move, lad. Margret will be here shortly with your breakfast. I'm Henry, Hermione's father. You don't look too chipper, lad - Now that I can tell you! Had a rough go after school, didn't you?"

Harry groaned again, but tried to make it sound confirming. He didn't even think about speaking, his throat felt like barbed wire, wrapped in sandpaper, doused in vinegar. In short, it hurt! Come to think of it, even breathing hurt.

"Let me tell you about how I came home late last Saturday, after I had a boy with emergency tooth repair caused by a bicycle accident, leaving me to nearly miss my daughter's first night home. When I arrived, no one was there to greet me. The whole house was deserted and there was a strange warbling sound in the air. Then, I found a note telling me that my family was out in the backyard. Imagine my surprise when I got there and found my wife and daughter torturing her boyfriend to death. I always thought it was the father's job to do that." Harry tried to shake his head in mirth, and groaned again in pain. Her father certainly had the same vicious streak of humour as her mother.

Margret entered the room, however, sparing Harry any more humiliation. She carried a tray in one hand that was filled with what he could only assume was his breakfast. In her other hand there

was a huge bag bearing a logo of two winged serpents winding around a staff. She placed the items down and, after a quick search in the bag approached him bearing a spray can.

"Open your mouth, Harry. This will help. I imagine your throat hurts after all that screaming. But do only talk if necessary while it works. It only masks the pain, so you could permanently damage your singing voice."

Harry refrained from a groan and settled for a glare, but quickly stopped as even that hurt. He painfully opened his mouth and sighed as the spray took effect.

He noticed the adults around him, but missed a beloved face.

"H'rm'e", he whispered.

Margret understood his intention and launched into an explanation.

"She is downstairs in the kitchen. Harry, the ritual took over three hours to run its course, and you were cramping and screaming all the time. After three hours, your scar even started smoking! A few moments later, you suddenly collapsed. I had to give you CPR."

At Harry's dumbfound expression - which did hurt a lot - she dumbbed it down.

"I had to restart your heart. You died."

He paled as the truth hit him. Margret noticed and gave him some time to cope before she continued.

"Hermione broke down when that happened. We brought you two into your beds, but she started riffling through her books immediately and refused to sleep. She hasn't spoken a word since then. She's hurting terribly after your ordeal."

She held him back with her hand on his chest as Harry made a weak attempt to stand. All he could think about was getting to Hermione; she was in pain. It didn't matter to him whether it was physical or emotional; he just knew that he had to help her. He would suffer the pain of hell for her and he'd be damned if his weak body stopped him now.

"Stop! Please, stop." Margret pleaded, carefully holding him in place.

"Nearly every muscle in your body is badly bruised from all that cramping. It won't help anybody if you hurt yourself even more. I have brought you some stuff from the pharmacy and some of my own stuff. I'll give you an injection to loosen your muscles and make you sleep, so they can heal properly. They are currently stiff and liable to cramp again, and I don't want any rupture occurring. I'll give you something for the pain and a salve for your scar. I have lots of sport salve for muscle recovery, and Hermione is currently brewing healing potions that do the same that I expect to be ready soon. She was working non-stop the last two days, not even sleeping. She will be done and here in a few hours. Rest now." She tried to talk him out of it, and finally, more due to exhaustion than acceptance, Harry stopped resisting.

His battered body wasn't up to more than a token resistance. In his current state, he wouldn't be able to wrestle a kitten. He nodded weakly and relaxed.

Seeing his eyes close, she gave his cheek a final pet and administered the calmative, forgoing breakfast. He wasn't in a state to eat anything, anyway. It should make him rest for a few hours, and hopefully the potions would be ready by then. She had watched helplessly as Hermione had worked herself to near death by exhaustion. The girl had stayed up night and day for over forty hours, resisting all attempts to get her to sleep and producing every potion she thought would be helpful. She had even made a trip to Diagon Alley to get some of the stuff she didn't have and wouldn't raise any red flags of suspicion on her.

While she smeared a cream on Harry's now blistered scar, she noticed her husband's dumbfounded look. At her inquiring look, he responded, visibly shaken.

"He wanted to go to her, didn't he? His muscles are nearly ripped apart, his tendons stretched like rubber bands, but he wanted to go to her to comfort her? I thought you were joking about the both of them, but that is ridiculous. Anybody with those injuries would just lie there and pray for death!"

She sighed, and unconsciously tried to straighten the hair of the sleeping teen while Henry stepped up beside her.

"He has it bad. They got it bad. But they don't really know about it. Hermione might have suspected and denied it, but he didn't even think about it until I asked him in the car. The idea completely overwhelmed him. He would gladly have walked into a lorry for her, but didn't know why. I think he accepted and admitted his feelings right before the ritual started. That made it even harder for Hermione."

"Why's that?" Henry asked, as Margret nestled herself into his shoulder.

"Think about it. He admitted his love, endured hours of torture, and died. And she did that to him. It's just like those crap novels she reads in secret."

"So they are in love, and she nearly killed him by trying to help?"

"Yes. And he still isn't out of the woods. There was so much damage done. It would be a wonder if he recovers without lasting damage. Hermione says the potions will take care of that, but I fear what will happen if they don't. You know, we will be leaving for that convention in a barely a week, and if he isn't ok by then, I don't know what to do. We can't bring him into a hospital like that, or questions will be asked. And if we call magical help, it was all in vain."

"If he's not ok by then, we'll stay. I'll go and tell Hermione." Henry said and Margret grabbed his hand. She nodded and gave his hand a squeeze, giving approval. With a sigh, he turned and left the room, keeping a hold on her hand until it was pulled out of his own, leaving her at her vigil.

Finding Hermione was easy; he just had to follow the noxious fumes wafting from the kitchen.

There she was; bending over a medieval looking cauldron boiling on the fire while three of their normal pots were stewing unmentionable things on the other three gas stoves. Henry supposed he would have to throw them away. All over the place was strange stuff.

She had been up all night, again, and had even raided the garden for ingredients. Snails, daisies, even frogs were collected, sliced, and diced. He cringed at the thought of his girl slicing up a frog, but he assumed it was necessary to help Harry. She had written about having to prepare ingredients in class, so he supposed that this was a part of that.

He even spotted some nettles in the stove, presumably to dry them.

Right then, she had a pot of a boil cure done and had just finished marking an old marmalade jar for it. She had made some other potions on the fire that he had spotted her looking up in a book about Quidditch, and then searching her potion books for it. When it was used for sports injuries, it would certainly help.

Knowing that she wouldn't stop and listen, Henry just spoke across the room.

"Harry woke up and is rather well. He will need to heal, but he's better. But if he's not reasonably right in time for the travel, we'll stay here. Is that all right with you?"

He was surprised when Hermione did stop and walked over to hug him. It was only a short hug, but it was a start.

"It is. Thank you." She whispered, and immediately went back to her cauldron.

Hours later - only interrupted by a quick inhaling of the Chinese take-away her parents had ordered as cooking was impossible in the potion lab their kitchen got converted to - a tired Hermione had done all she could. She had made a boil remover, some pain potion, and a huge batch of healing potions for blunt impact injuries she had looked up after consulting The Big Book of Quidditch Injuries - bought after Lockhart had removed Harry's bones - about the most common potions used. Considering Harry being Harry, she made as much of everything as she could.

While Hermione was completing the potions, the doorbell rang, and Henry went to answer it. When he opened the door, he encountered two familiar people standing outside. The woman with the varying hair colours, the one Hermione had introduced as Tonks, an Aura-this-or-something, basically a police officer. The man he knew from

King's Cross, too, he was a Professor back a year or two, and some kind of friend of Harry's godfather and parents. Some Latin name he had forgotten.

Under different circumstances, he would have been glad to have some visitors around to talk about the magical world, but right now, it was a bit inconvenient. Especially since he remembered that those two were part of the group from which Harry was on the run. He thought he saw Hermione glancing out of the kitchen out of the corner of his eye but she didn't join him.

"Hello Mr. Granger. I'm Remus Lupin, and this is Miss N-, Miss Tonks." Remus introduced them and catching himself just in time before mentioning Tonks's name and having to face the dreadful consequences. Her glare was bad enough.

"You might remember us. Miss Tonks and I are looking for Harry Potter, and I thought it might be worth a try asking you if you have seen him." Remus continued, but stopped and started inhaling deeply, wrinkling his brow in thought.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I have no idea where he might be. I'd love to be of assistance, but right now, I'm a bit occupied. So not to be impolite, but I need to go back to work." Henry tried to turn them away politely but firmly.

He tried to close the door, but Remus was faster and much stronger than he was. Holding the door open with one hand, he entered the house, Tonks on his heels.

"What exactly is this project? Since I can smell enough healing potions for an entire Quidditch team, you might understand that I am quite a bit interested in it, too."

Just as Henry wanted to lay into Lupin for forcing his entry, a brown streak slammed into said man. Surprised, he saw his daughter stepping up behind Lupin, wrapping her left arm around his chest and deftly stepping into his knee from behind, thus forcing him to drop onto his knees. In a flash of motion, she held a knife to his throat and yelled, "Don't move!"

While Henry's brain was still occupied processing that input, Tonks was already reacting. With a scream of fury she drew her wand and

was already in motion to curse Hermione into next week, when Remus yelled something that made her stop in mid-motion.

"No! It's silver!"

Remus was normally not easy to ambush. His enhanced smell and other senses usually made him aware of everything around him long before others. But with all those potion fumes in the air and the kitchen noise, he simply missed Hermione's approach.

He thought had seen her through the kitchen door for a second, but it seemed that there was a second entrance, and she had used that to sneak around them and surprise him from behind.

Her stepping into his knee had brought him painfully to the ground, but that didn't bother him much, as he was much stronger than any mere human, let alone a teenage girl. Just as he wanted to shake her off, he noticed a sensation that DID bother him.

He felt a specific, well-known burning sensation at his throat. Silver. He knew for certain that if that was a knife she was holding - a wrong movement would cause his throat to be slit.

A normal knife would be unpleasant, but not fatal for a werewolf like him.

A silver knife, at the other hand, would kill him for certain. Recognizing that, he quickly shouted at Tonks to stop her from cursing the girl. As she stopped and lowered her wand, he returned his attention to Hermione.

Remus took a deep whiff of air. He could smell her fear, but no anger. Knowing that, he relaxed a bit and addressed her, softly. "Relax, Hermione. We don't want to hurt you. What do you want?" Her reply did surprise him.

"I want a magical oath from both of you that you won't take Harry away from here and won't reveal to anybody that he is here!"

"Hermione, Dumb..." Remus began speaking, but stopped as he felt her tense and the pressure of the knife increase, causing the silver to start leaving blisters on his skin.

"I won't let you take him back to that monster!" she screamed, causing both wizards' eyes to widen. "He won't be tortured by that evil man any longer. I want your oaths, now!"

Knowing no alternative, Remus drew his wand in slow and obvious motion, and gave his oath. Tonks followed a second later.

Clank

The knife fell to the floor, and the same moment Tonks exploded into motion, punching Hermione in the face, knocking her down. Trying to jump at her, she screamed in rage as she noticed herself being restrained by Remus, of all people. Henry was still rooted to the ground, but started to move towards Tonks, enraged.

"Let me go! She tried to kill you! I'll hex her into next week!" Tonks yelled, struggling to escape her favourite werewolf's grip.

"And I deserve it," a small voice from the floor stated, causing all motion in the room to stop, except for the heads, which were rapidly turning towards Hermione's form on the ground.

"What?" Tonks asked, not believing her ears. Henry groaned and shook his head.

Hermione sat up and shook her head slowly. "I deserve it. I won't say I'm sorry, because I'm not, but I won't stop you from doing to me whatever you want. At least Harry is safe." While she closed her eyes and steadied herself to be cursed, everybody in the room just stared at her.

Remus was the first to regain his bearings. "Ok, this whole thing has gone terribly wrong. Let's try to start again. We know now that Harry is here." He stated, and got a nod from Hermione in reply.

"Ok, why is he here, why won't you allow him to be taken away, and what are all these potions for?"

"You remember threatening Harry's uncle?" Hermione asked, getting nods from all adults. She stopped as she saw her mum coming down the stairs. She jumped to her feet and dashed to the stairs.

"How is he?" she asked instantly, completely ignoring everyone else.

"He's better. Still a lot to heal, but he is better. I gave him something to sleep." Margret proclaimed, only to make a double-take as she saw her daughter's face.

"What happened to you?" she asked, referring to the bruise forming on her daughter's cheek.

Remus, of course, wanted to know more about Harry's current state. In his book, his honorary godson certainly came first, especially when injured.

"Harry is hurt? What happened? Can we see him?" he blurted, slightly panicked.

Knowing that the story would take a while to tell, Hermione had to deny his request, for now. Instead, she invited all into the living room, offering an explanation.

A few moments later, they all sat in the living room. Remus had quickly cast a healing charm on Hermione, who smiled and thanked him, while Tonks glared and huffed, but kept silent.

"Ok, what did you want to tell us, Hermione? You said something about the threatening of Vernon." Remus asked, after taking a seat next to Tonks, if only to restrain her if needed. He knew that the young Auror had a weak spot for him, and felt a bit honoured that she rose to his defence as viciously as she had, but right now, it was time for diplomacy, and Merlin knows, Tonks had not one diplomatic bone in her body.

While the adults were silently waiting for Hermione to tell the tale, the girl in the spotlight was looking for words. She was tired and would rather go to bed than face an interrogation, but honestly, no one except her and Harry knew the true story, and she wouldn't let them bother Harry when he needed his strength. She brought him into his current misery, and it was her job to make it right.

"It backfired."

At first, Remus and Tonks looked puzzled, but rapidly connected the dots. Dumbledore had not been forthcoming with info, offering only

his vague guesses and hand picked info, but they had guessed already that Harry had a good cause for leaving.

As Hermione continued the tale of all the things Harry had told her about his life at Privet Drive, they sat stunned, listening to a story they never thought could happen under their own eyes.

The story of a mistreated boy finally reaching the end of his rope.

"Harry wouldn't have killed them. He couldn't kill anyone; he is firmly on the light side." Remus stated after she had finished her tale.

Hermione let a small snort escape.

"Come on, he killed already. Many times: the troll in first year, Professor Quirrell, the Basilisk, Riddle's memory. He knows how to kill. He feels terrible about that. Nevertheless, everyone just pretends that it didn't happen. No one helped him to cope with that. Still, everybody wants him to defeat Voldemort one day! Do you think he would talk him into surrender or that Voldemort could be imprisoned somewhere? And grow up! You can't even hear his moniker without shivering! How will you fight him?"

All the time, Hermione was getting more and more annoyed with the magicals present. They just sat there and proclaimed Harry some mythical fighter for the light, ignoring how much darkness he had already lived through. She nearly lost it when Tonks jumped at Voldemort's name. Remus fared better, but he flinched, still.

"I believe that Harry has that down pat." Tonks huffed.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione asked, completely confused.

"Fighting You-know-who. Harry seems to have nearly killed him last night, somehow. He just has to repeat what he tried, and it will probably finish him off."

"Oh!" Hermione said, only to grin broadly after a second. "I didn't know it would work that well. Harry will be pleased when he hears that," she added happily, glad that her plan had such a positive side effect. "Pity we can't repeat that. Either way, we probably still have to kill the rest of his followers." She added as afterthought.

"What? They will be arrested, not killed!" Tonks yelled. "I can't believe that you are thinking of killing them outright!"

That made Hermione loose it, completely. The order members, like most magical people, saw the world only in black or white, just like Harry told her in the bus. Time to shock them into seeing how the real world operates.

"You just sit here high and mighty and proclaim your view how a war has to be fought, according to your white mage in his castle. Pray tell, how many Death Eaters were captured in the last year, and with how many of them did Harry have a role in their capture? How many are already back on the streets? Do you know that we had stunned or bound every single one of those in the Ministry at least once? They just freed their comrades and kept on firing deadly hexes at us. When one of us went down, he stayed down. The only way to get them is to hit them as hard as they hit us. Harry has learnt this lesson. I have. Have you?" she yelled at the older woman, boiling with rage.

"But we can't stoop to their level, or we will be as bad as them!" Tonks blurted.

Henry chose that moment to enter the fray. "Says who?"

"Dumbledore, of course!" Tonks responded, only to feel a bit sheepish just a moment later as Henry tore her argument apart.

"So the man who has let all the known Death Eaters bribe themselves out of prison, allows a child to be abused by a foster family he himself had appointed, allowed more than one man be thrown into jail without trial, and lets a known Death Eater abuse students in his school, all for the greater good, is your moral compass?" Henry enumerated, slightly out of breath after that long sentence. Hermione would have easily managed to go on twice as long, but it was impressive, nonetheless.

While they thought Dumbledore certainly had earned their respect, those facts were not easily discarded. Remus especially knew that Dumbledore always claimed to have the moral high ground, but was capable of sacrificing everyone at whim if it helped the 'greater good' – which was whatever he proclaimed it to be.

While he had already made up his mind, and hoped that Tonks would see the light, too; Hermione, who had taken the short break to compose herself, took over again.

"As long as the Death Eaters are still around, it will never end." She had talked about that with Harry, and both knew that as long as a single Death Eater was alive, they would try to resurrect Voldemort, again.

"But you can't run around killing anybody! Harry wouldn't do that!" Tonks countered.

"Do you know why he didn't kill the Dursleys?" she laughed. "He said that it was only because he felt they hadn't earned it yet. Harry has changed. He's not the same he was before the battle."

"He's grown harder. He knows the kids' gloves have to come off in the war. He is so, so, so... intense." Her blush at her struggle for the last word did not go unnoticed by her mother, but was left uncommented on. For now.

Feeling restless, Remus brushed the topic aside. "Ok, whatever. That explains why he doesn't want to return to Privet drive. But why can't we contact the Order?"

"Because Dumbledore would probably force him back to Privet Drive, and would certainly bind him to the wards again."

"He did what?" Tonks screamed, while Remus just looked confused and demanded details.

Before Hermione could reply, Tonks spoke.

"Remus, you won't know about that, only a family like the Blacks or Malfoys would. That is something reprehensible that we used before Azkaban was founded. It would mean that a person's whole magic would be siphoned away and channelled into wards. While bound, they would be no more than Squibs. And the release ritual is extremely painful, and gets worse the longer they are bound." The thought of Harry being subjected to such a vile practice made her shudder in disgust. She reached out and laid a hand on Hermione's knee.

"I understand why you acted like that now, Hermione. He did that to Harry every summer?" she asked, her anger at the younger witch completely evaporated.

"No, just when he placed him there first."

You could hear a pin drop after that. On the carpet. Tonks stared at her, jaw wide open. Being a metamorphmagus, that was quite a sight, almost as impressive as her hair changing slowly to white. Remus began to show an equal horror as his brain caught up.

"Yes, about 14 years ago." Margret stated.

"That's impossible! He wouldn't be able to join Hogwarts, then. He wouldn't be able to cast!" Tonks stated flatly. She knew for a fact that such a bind would have turned him into a squib.

"He did. I don't know how. He certainly would have known if the binding were lifted after 10 years before starting Hogwarts," Hermione told her. Tonks shuddered at the thought and nodded.

Henry used that moment to rejoin the conversation. "We believe Dumbledore maybe tweaked something to let Harry keep a little power," he offered.

Remus snorted, drawing attention. "There was nothing little with Harry's power. He did a corporal Patronus at age 13!"

"Most mature wizards are unable to cast that guardian spirit charm, let alone a corporal one," he explained, after noticing some questioning glances from the Grangers, while Tonks jaw hit the table, again. Literally.

Regaining her composure and resetting her jaw to normal measurements, Tonks continued.

"Cor blimey! Unbelievable! But - there is no way to tweak that binding. It would take as much as a ward could siphon. The only way to still be able to cast would be if he had more power than a ward could ..."

Her voice faded into a loud silence shared by everybody as each for himself analysed that bit of information.

"He couldn't?" Tonks asked, first. That feat would be enormous. A ward was something akin to a magical black hole, sucking up all power it could get.

"Might be," Hermione responded. "Remember that Prophecy? It says that he has the power to beat Voldemort."

"That's just... Wow..." Remus eloquently stated.

Tonks nodded. "Yeah, double that!"

Suddenly, Remus jerked to attention. "You said he is hurt? And that lot of potions you brewed. But you told us his uncle only hit him once, didn't he?"

"AGAIN!" Tonks suddenly screamed, causing everybody to jump and glare at her.

"You said he would bind him to the wards, AGAIN!" she repeated, horror lacing her voice. "You didn't - say you didn't! That could have killed him!" she said, her voice pleading.

"It did." Hermione sobbed, before she broke down in tears, clinging to her mother.

AN:

DerLaCroix, also known as 'The Dark Lord Cliffy', sat in his ornate throne, his cloak draped over the stairs to the raised platform, his trusted betas,

She-Who-Is-Hard-To-Spell (embirsiphonelilathia) and He-Who-Corrects (pfeil) standing to his left and right, respectively, as he smiled cruelly at the crawling minions squealing and begging for mercy.

Again, he had only given them only a small piece of the available knowledge, relishing in their agony at the sudden loss of contact.

The cruel lord was in a bellowing evil laugh when suddenly a hand started pushing his shoulder repeatedly from behind...

"Darling, get up, we'll be late for work. Be a luv and fix me two toasts with butter and strawberry jam while I feed the horses..."

Damn...

Singled out minions:

shoves Mariann's away to stop her reading the outline over his shoulder Girl, you're good at guessing. I'll wait how you like the private Hermione behind her façade at school...

Teg – as you saw, drugs can do the strangest

someguyfawkes Tell me one plot that hasn't been done, yet. But wait, mine could be a first...

Harry being slightly whipped? That's them. And in the right hands, a whip can be huge fun...

On a side note, I hate redundant plots and clichés with a fiery passion of a thousand suns. If you don't have at least one idea that hasn't been used before, don't bother with regurgitation unless you are a genius with words. You will see me mock a lot of stupid plots and clichés in my fics.

DarkHeart81: it was Hestia Jones...

Vukk: Love has nothing to do with this-and the wards were strong enough that Voldemort rather tried to get Harry at Hogwarts instead of Surrey, although Harry's address would be easy to get from the Ministry.

You know how Dumbledore likes arcane knowledge, the obscurer the better, and loves his pet projects. When the wards at #4 strengthened at immense rate, he felt his pet theory of love and all that bleach confirmed. He knew there wouldn't be that much magic in a child, so it must have been the love, or not?

hash4uall: *blinks* *begins typing* *deletes* *blinks again* *shrugs and shakes head before walking off for an aspirin*

Unmentioned minions:

Damn you... Your delightful moaning and grovelling made me post early, again. (I usually don't have that problem, honestly!)

I hope I can overcome this, or else I don't know how to keep up with the writing when I have to put out 10k words per week instead of 6. I hate posting on the fly, I always refine points and reedit a few (like ten) chapters back to make the plots flow smoothly.

I give you this extra long chapter now; I couldn't bring it over me to cut it. I thought about cliffy-ing it at the point where Remus and Tonks showed up, but then, this would make you'd squeal in agony again, which would make two things happen.

1. I'll have an orgasm.

2. I'll fall asleep.

Since we all don't want this to happen, I'll give you a longer fic this time, with only a half-cliffy, which should keep your moaning to the appropriate 'nursing wood' level.

That's a one of a kind gift, so read slowly.

Chapter 5: Making it right.

June 29th, 1996, Granger residence early afternoon

Remus and Tonks slumped into their seats in silent terror. What they just heard couldn't be true – it mustn't!

Once again, it was Remus who first regained his composure.

"He died? But you said he was getting better?" he croaked, his voice betraying him.

"I brought him back," Margret told him, ignoring her husband's sniggering. He loved the line of jokes that this statement triggers. "It took me 2 minutes of CPR to stabilize him, but he came back."

Both magicals were looking at each other. In unison, they turned to Margret. "CPR?"

"I gave his heart a massage to make it beat again."

That was a shock to both. In the magical world, there was a simple rule: If your heart stops beating, you're dead.

"You restarted his heart? But if he died, his soul was already gone!" Tonks blurted. She had a muggle father, but she never got that involved in muggle culture. Clothes and music were just fine. Using electric appliances was something she could do, but she certainly had no clue about muggle medicine. She always found that healing spells and potions won hands down.

"If so, then it came back," Margret said pointedly. "CPR or electroshocks are used regularly in our medicine. It's rather easy to bring someone back if his heart stopped beating only a few moments ago. Don't you have anything like that to revive people?"

Tonks shook her head. "No, we have a simple rule. If the heart stops, and you stop breathing, you are dead. It never occurred to anybody that you could restart a heart. Amazing."

Remus was amazed, too, but his curiosity won out.

"What happened?"

"Well, we started the ritual after I gave him some strong muggle painkillers. We believe they helped, but his body cramped for hours. It took about three hours, and then suddenly stopped. He trembled a bit, and then stopped breathing. I immediately started CPR, and Henry helped with the resuscitation. After a few minutes, he came back, but fainted straight away. We took him into the guest room and started treating him as best we could."

She softly petted Hermione's hair, who had cried herself to exhaustion on her dad's shoulder, and continued. "Hermione here made every potion she could, and we'll start that treatment when he awakes later. You see, we couldn't give him any potion while he was passed out. So I gave him normal painkillers and a relaxant which should knock him out till at least mid afternoon." She paused a second, assessing the two in front of her.

"I've got one question for both of you. Will you help us?"

Remus agreed immediately, but Tonks procrastinated. She was raised to see Dumbledore as an idol, a more than life-sized man who never did wrong. But all she had been told today indicated the opposite. That Dumbledore had knowingly sent a child to live in an abusive home and had stooped so low as to use a borderline dark technique on a toddler was hard to digest.

But still, she was an Auror, whose job was to see the facts, and those were solid. She sighed and nodded at Margret.

"Ok, I'm in."

At this point Margret went and made some tea for her guests to make planning more pleasant. Shortly after tea was served, Henry gently took Hermione, who had finally fallen asleep, and carried her to bed.

"I beg your pardon; what did you just say?" Margret inquired, as she had missed Tonks mumble something while watching her husband care for their most precious.

"Nothing. I just noted that she acts as fanatically as a life-debtor. Remus! Look at the mess you've created!"

But Remus wasn't bothering. While still fighting the coughs of his spit-take, he pressed two words out which made Tonks groan. "She is."

"Merlin's hairy balls!" Tonks yelled. "Any more big news left for tonight? What else could go wrong?"

She suddenly tensed and looked at Remus.

"Please, don't tell me you're gay!"

While the now glowing werewolf was sputtering denials - which seemed to soothe Tonks enormously - Margret cleared her throat and tried to put that train wreck of conversation back on track.

"Not to change topic, but I'm changing the topic. What happened to Hermione? Is it bad?"

"Please let us wait for your husband," Remus pleaded.

"Oh yes, definitely." Tonks quipped. "I'm certainly not going to explain that twice.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Granger, it's not life threatening. It's just a bit of a mess to clean up." Remus tried to soothe Margret's nerves while they waited for Henry to return.

When said husband returned five minutes later, he was not looking too happy.

"Let me guess, she woke up again and is frantic to find other ways to help Harry, isn't she?" Tonks welcomed him back.

Henry stopped walking and stared at her. "How...?"

"Remus, you're the one with teaching experience. Explain while I try to think of a solution, would you, darling?"

Eyeing Tonks cautiously as she furrowed her brows and cycled her hair colour in thought, Remus made a mental note for a later conversation and soldiered on into the breach into which he had just been ordered.

"First of all, this is not life threatening. It is uncomfortable, but it happens every now and then in the wizarding world," he started after Henry had taken his seat across Tonks and next to his wife.

"Hermione owes her life to Harry: he saved her at least once in first year, and then a second, or maybe even more times if we consider the recent battle they were involved in. I believe Harry also owes his life to her at least once, but who's keeping score."

"So they have helped each other often, so what? Why isn't he fussing over her?" Henry replied.

"He is," Margret interrupted her husband. "Remember when he tried to stand up and go to her? If that's not fussing, then what is?"

"As I said," Remus continued, "Saving someone causes what we call a life debt. It makes you try to repay that debt."

"It's not a strong compulsion - you could go on your whole life completely ignoring it - so don't you even think for just one second that this debt made them friends. The act might have, but the debt surely didn't. Peter Pettigrew owes Harry a life debt, but he still actively helped to capture him and even hurt him to collect his blood for the resurrection ritual," he continued quickly when he saw Henry's face darken.

"I fail to see the problem, then." Margret interjected.

"The problem is," Tonks took over, "that your daughter has a conscience."

"Not helping, Tonks," Remus cut her off. "Please return to your pondering, and let me continue."

Seeing her shrug, grin, and nod, he turned back to the Grangers.

"Where was I before I got so rudely interrupted? Argh! Tonks! Stop that! I told you to ponder, not to pummel me!" he said, rubbing his now bruised ribs.

"Ok, the debt. In Hermione's case, she has probably convinced herself that it is her fault that the ritual nearly killed Harry. Knowing her, I am sure she must feel terrible. And the debt increases the

feeling that she should make it up to him, so between herself and the debt, she is driving herself insane."

Both Grangers nodded their understanding. Henry voiced their most imminent question.

"How do we stop that?"

That was the moment for which Tonks had been preparing, and she took over from Remus with a smile and a nod in his direction.

"The nicest solution would be if Harry could convince her that it wasn't her fault."

"Fat chance," Henry snorted. "As if anybody could convince Hermione of anything after she's made up her mind."

"Well, then," Tonks continued, "another way would be to repay that debt. Saving his life would be possible, but that can't really be planned, since he must be in real, acute danger. Since they are too young, an arranged marriage is out of question, too."

"You bet!" Henry chuckled. "Is there any way to solve this that doesn't demand a life-long formal binding?"

"Well, history told us another way, a failsafe one to make it right... Ah, could you please put down your tea, Mr. Granger?"

Henry was a bit confused by that request, but he did as she asked. It was quickly revealed why she did so as her next line caused him only a coughing fit, saving her and Remus both from being doused in spit tea.

"A quick roll..." she said, already cringing at the expected reaction.

"You are kidding us, aren't you?" Margret asked for confirmation.

"Sorry, but no, I'm not. Usually the debt is repaid by doing something for the debtor or being punished by him somehow. The way I mentioned would be the traditional way, but maybe an extended snog with Harry might do the job, as well." Tonks joked, but her words faded slowly at the sight of the Grangers sprouting wide grins.

"Ok, what did I miss?"

After a quick double proclamation of "Nothing!" the topic was quickly changed to the near future. They had a short look at the still sleeping Harry and Remus instantly proposed to get a trustworthy healer for tomorrow, while Tonks instructed the Grangers in the use of the potions, as she knew much about that from her medical class.

Tonks also volunteered to spy a little on the Order to find out what they already knew. They agreed on reconvening tomorrow in the early morning.

The Grangers lead their guests out then split up to clean up the kitchen and look after Harry.

Later that afternoon, both doctors sat in Harry's room, as they already thought about it, and watched the teen sleep.

Margret took the time to look around the room. They had already placed some cups of potion on the table by the window. Harry's trunk stood in front of the wardrobe - they should put his stuff away into it, she thought.

Her mental checklist was interrupted by the sound of Henry clearing his throat. When he had her attention, he spoke.

"We need to tell him, you know."

"Of course; he would freak out if those two just show up here." Margret smirked.

"Margret, stop that. You know what I mean."

"Sorry. You mean Hermione and her not so secret fantasies?"

"Yes. I believe they are a big part of this mess. And he might not know how to deal with it if he doesn't know all the facts."

"You know, it could seriously hurt their relationship. It could ruin everything."

"We'll have to see. I am not really happy to give them a free pass. She's still my princess, you know?" Henry asked, still not too happy about his girl growing up.

"Come on. Even if we don't, they are at boarding school - they'll probably end up as bedmates by next summer, at the latest. Also, they've been practically dating for 5 years by now, if I go by the letters Hermione has sent. I don't think they are suddenly going to hurt each other or rush things," Margret concluded, and they fell silent.

Some time late in the afternoon, Harry started stirring. Margret went over and sat on his bedside. A few minutes later, he was awake and listening to her.

He was easily coaxed into drinking the potions, and the effect was noticeable. He wouldn't be able to consume more than two per day, according to Tonks, but it did help a lot. Margret made an optimistic estimate that he would be able to move around again in two days. They also made Harry aware that they now had help from Remus and Tonks, which he didn't take too well until they told him about the oaths given.

After Harry had eaten a light meal, Henry braved the topic.

"Harry, we - or better, Hermione - need your help."

The Grangers couldn't help but smile as Harry instantly responded. "What can I do?"

He would do anything for his best friend. For a second, he contemplated since when he had considered her his best friend, but that wasn't important now.

Margret decided to use her typical blunt approach.

"She is driving herself insane because she believes that she nearly caused your death. Remus said that there might be some life-debts aggravating her situation. By now, she's been working non-stop for two days, without sleeping even an hour."

After she had given him the details of what Remus had told them, he gave them the only possible answer of which he was aware.

"How can I help?"

"Excuse me if I get a bit long-winded, but I have to. When Hermione was about eight, she was through nearly every book we had in our library, and when we were out at work, she went and raided my secret stack of books."

"Oh, now you are curious, aren't you Harry?" she smiled at him as he perked up.

"Well, it was my collection of, well, erotic literature," she started, but Henry made a cough which sounded definitely like "housewife porn", which earned him a death glare from his wife. Thankfully, he seemed to be immune, and only beamed a Cheshire grin at her.

"Ok, it was a bit kinkier than your usual paperback, but not that bad." she huffed at him.

Of course, Harry had understood what she had meant. His facial expression was best described as 'trout-slapped'. Henry sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Come on, Harry. I know that all those wizards still live in the Victorian era and think sex is something disgusting, but you grew up in the real world. Don't look so shocked; do you think your friends have ever seen lingerie commercials or girls in bikinis? I bet they still wear those striped suits for swimwear," he joked, as Margret snorted at the mental picture.

"Well, picture my surprise when she came to me that evening and asked me what a 'manliness' is, and how it could be throbbing. As I knew she would look it up anyway, I fetched Margret and we proceeded to give her the talk. Since then, we've been open about that topic in our family, especially after she walked in on us once when school had quit early." Henry told him, blushing slightly, while Margret did the same, only much more pronouncedly. Harry still couldn't put the hints together, and kept blushing madly and wondering what the hell they were telling him that for.

"Ok, time to be blunt. My wife and I do some role-playing in the bedroom, and Hermione wanted to know why her mum was wearing a maid's dress and was bent over a table, of all things. Don't give us

that look, young man. We are certainly not doing that chains and wax and leather stuff, although chains might come into play. Come to think of it, wax might, too." Henry explained, and faded out in thought for a second before he shook his head and started talking again.

"Anyway, we play roles. Like duke and the maid, warlord and slave, such stuff. Got it? She combined the knowledge that you can play roles in the bedroom with those paperbacks and formed her idea of how the ideal relationship should be like."

Harry had to laugh at that statement. It was just like Hermione to plan how her perfect relationship should look at an early age, and out of books, even. "Ok, but how does that concern the problem?"

"Do I have to get the crayons out for you?" Henry huffed, throwing his hands into the air.

"She wants to somehow make it up to you, and her magic demands that she does, as well. Traditionally, it was commonplace to have a betrothal over such things, but we do not want to use both barrels for the first try. So, because of her crush on you and her fantasies, it might be enough if you demand that she'd be your girlfriend. She would agree before you finished asking," Henry concluded his speech.

"Since you already confessed your love to her, I don't believe that it would be a burden on you, right Harry?" Margret smirked at a brightly red blushing Harry.

Grinning broadly, he shook his head. He was a bloody idiot when it came to girls, but if he could help Hermione by being her boyfriend, well, whenever, wherever. He certainly wouldn't refuse that offer.

"You really think that she likes me?" he asked timidly. He didn't want to ruin their friendship just on chance.

Margret shot him a smile and reached for a bag on the table. Within moments, she had produced a warped piece of silver, and Harry immediately recognized the silver plate by the runes engraved in it. Henry's eyes widened as he saw it. "She didn't! She really used her trophy?" He wondered, before looking at Harry. "She definitely likes you - that's the next best thing to a proposal!"

At Harry's confused look, Margret turned the plate so that he saw the face. 'Spelli.. ee' was the only thing that still was legible, since it was the biggest engraving on the completely ruined trophy.

"This was her greatest treasure, a trophy from winning the district's spelling bee in her age group. She didn't hesitate to ruin it for you."

Harry felt really moved and a bit sorry that Hermione did that to help him. But that he meant that much to her made him really happy in a way he wasn't used to. Right then, he remembered the conjunctive used before. "You said 'might be enough'. What did you mean by that?"

Now it was time for Henry to blush. That was a conversation he was certainly not prepared to have with his daughter's boyfriend - ever! No father should! He shot a pleading glance at his wife, who laughed and took over.

"Depending on how much of this funk she's in is caused by her own guilt and how much is caused by the debt, well, you might need to punish her somehow to make things right. That might mean a spanking or something else..." She told Harry, her final words lingering in the air as she watched Harry's stunned face.

"You're taking the Mickey, right?" Harry gasped. Pictures of him, spanking Hermione's naked butt or having her going down on him invaded his mind, but he valiantly tried to keep them at bay and continue with the present conversation.

Margret sighed. "We trust both of you, and I do think that you love each other too much to abuse each other. So, no, we are not kidding you. Whatever is needed to get her out of her funk is ok with us."

"Just do not tell me any details; I will happily continue to have a virgin daughter, even if I already am a great-grandfather, ok?" Henry playfully huffed, a twinkle in his eye.

This made Margret laugh out loud, but she immediately caught herself.

"Don't think we did this just to get Hermione well. I was already sure that you both would end up doing something or the other this

summer even before I knew about that debt problem. And I was ok with that. I trust Hermione, and I do trust you, Harry. I just want you two to take care and be responsible in your decisions, alright?"

Harry just nodded, too moved to speak at this proclamation of trust. As Margret noticed his watery eyes, she captured him in a warm hug, giving him time to compose himself.

"It's ok, Harry, I know you are not used to be trusted or deemed responsible for anything, but we do like and support you. We'll get Hermione for you, so you can get this stupid mess out of the way right now. Just try to be firm, and to project authority, and I promise you that everything will be fine."

"Just remember, we support everything you decide to do, Harry," was Henry's farewell as the Grangers left in search of their daughter.

While Harry was recovering from his most embarrassing conversation ever and preparing for the next candidate for that particular title, Hermione was still tossing in her bed where she had been brought. She was tired but unable to sleep. She had to make her mistake up to him. Even as tired as she was, she couldn't manage more than a few fitful minutes of sleep.

She just had woken again, at least the tenth time that afternoon, so the knock on her door came not inconvenient. She sat up and called out to enter.

"Honey, Harry wants to talk to you." Her father spoke, softly.

She instantly jumped to her feet, not even bothering to change out of her summer-time sleeping attire, consisting of silk shorts and a lacy camisole, just quickly throwing her silk kimono over it.

She turned to wait for her parents to lead, but her mother grabbed her arm and softly whispered into her ear, while shoving her towards the door. "Alone. Go to him. He knows."

Only a minute later, a still confused and very meek Hermione knocked and entered at Harry's call. Without looking into his face, she knelt down next to the bed. In a timid voice, which Harry hadn't heard since their first year, she addressed him.

"My parents told me you wanted to talk to me?"

Harry took his time to look at her. Of course, she looked like death warmed over, with her hair a fright and deep circles below her eyes. Harry didn't think he would look any better if he had been brewing potions for two days without pause. She was wearing a lightweight bathrobe, exposing her smooth, muscular legs. For a minute he wondered why they were that well formed, until he remembered how many stairs were between the common room and the library.

While her parents were fetching her, Harry had thought over Margret's advice and decided to try a different approach from usual. Instead of asking questions, and looking stupid by exposing his lack of knowledge, he would try to let her tell him how to proceed. That damned hat wanted to put him into Slytherin, for pity's sake, so he should start acting a bit like one. So he tried to channel Snape on a good day, and began speaking.

"Your parents told me what happened," he addressed her, keeping his expression as neutral as possible. "Do you want to say something about it?"

Hermione cringed. She had pondered what her mother tried to tell her, but her worst fear would be that he was upset about the botched ritual and his close call with death. She knew she certainly would have been. The fear of losing him started to take over.

Unbeknownst to her, Harry nearly called his own bluff as she shrank into her self. Tears started rolling and she sobbed silently. Slowly, she took a breath before she spoke.

"It's my fault. I should have researched that ritual in depth instead of just winging it. You nearly died because of that. I have no excuse."

To say Harry was a bit surprised would be an understatement. If she had looked at him, she might have seen through his ruse, but she was so occupied with feeling sorry that she didn't notice his mood. Misjudging his silence for anger, Hermione desperately blurted the first thing that came to her mind, and then blushed brightly.

"I'm sorry, please - I'll do anything you want if you forgive me."

It took all the power he could muster to not gawk at her. Her parents were right. She had said something he would never, ever, have expected her to say.

After a long look at her, he decided to act.

"Take that robe off." he told her.

Surprised, she stared at him. Seeing the resolve in his eyes, she slowly stood up and undid her robe, revealing a hint of nothing covering her nubile body. His eyes followed the fabric down as it pooled around her legs and then roamed upwards over her now exposed body. Her shapely legs, smooth and so soft, which ended in a lacy slip, her firm stomach, her...

"Harry? Are you all right?"

Her voice pulled him out of the hormone-induced vision he just experienced. He had to take a few breaths to steady his now hammering heart and was glad that those potions prevented him from feeling any pain.

At the other hand, he deemed the potential pain worth that vision. He stammered a short excuse and continued to steady his breath, fighting his blush and other responses to no avail.

Hermione was confused. After she had blurted out her embarrassing offer a few seconds ago, she was scared. She had - without thinking it through - offered everything to him, but he hadn't responded, yet. 'Why can't he finally say something?' she thought over and over again.

Finally glancing upwards, she had noticed Harry being spaced out. His eyes were locked at her, but had a dreamy expression to them. As she noticed his breathing getting laboured, she got concerned and called to him.

For some reason, he had jerked at her voice, but had returned to the present. She was afraid that it might have been a Voldemort vision, but he mumbled that he had just gotten caught up in his thoughts. Dropping his hands to his lap, he leaned back into the cushions, closing his eyes.

When he started to blush violently, she contemplated the reason. Before Harry had regained his bearings, she had already put the pieces together. The pledge she gave a few seconds ago, his reaction, and not to forget her mother's warning.

With a broad, lascivious smile, she waited for Harry to reopen his eyes.

"Were you considering some corporal punishment?" she asked, smiling innocently, stretching the word in question to its maximum length.

'Gotcha!' She shouted out loud in her mind as he groaned and re-blushed, his hands pressing down at his lap, vigorously. She barely constrained herself from starting a physical victory dance, which would have been as shameless and brazen as her unrestrained mental one.

"You're evil, you know that!" he gasped through clenched teeth, knowing he was busted. "You certainly have earned yourself some punishment for that!"

As she was now experiencing her own vigorous blush and hormone assault, Harry finally had some time to recover.

"Can we talk for a while without innuendo?" he pleaded, to which she nodded affirmatively, still slightly pink in the face.

"My parents told you." It was a statement of fact, not a question. She just knew that her matchmaker of a mother had instigated this.

"Yes. But given some hints, I could have figured you out myself, too!" He quipped. "In a century or so," he admitted under her disbelieving glare, grinning.

Hermione shook her head, and stalled a bit. Finally, she spoke the question of which she was afraid.

"Where does that leave us?"

Harry took his time to ponder that. Hermione was a good friend, and a blessing. There was not much he would have achieved without her

help. Ok, she pushed him often, but every time, it was only to help him to achieve something.

It was quite a course-correction his mind had taken the last days, and he didn't see her as 'one of the boys' anymore. In fact, he had noticed that he had seen her as something completely different for a long time already. It became so obvious that he had even told her when he was afraid he might not survive the ritual.

But now, his new love interest was not only a healthy, intelligent young female, but he had been told that she had an extremely kinky side, to boot. Somehow, it all didn't add up. And when in doubt, there was always one thing to do. Ask Hermione.

"I don't know. I certainly want to explore that possibility. But it is a bit weird that the spokeswoman of SPEW" - he bravely ignored her shouted correction of "S-P-E-W!" - "secretly would like to be subservient in some way to someone. It doesn't add up."

Hermione nodded. Of course, with her carefully constructed public persona, it wouldn't.

"At first glance it doesn't, but think again. I don't want to be enslaved; I want someone to look up to. It would be voluntary, just a game of teasing. Just think of cooking. I know you hated it to cook for the Dursleys, but how about cooking a fancy meal for me? Wouldn't you like that?"

Pondering that for a while, he agreed.

"Well, if I agree to follow one's orders, I am not powerless. In fact, I am in control, since I'll decide if I play along with the orders given. Those poor elves don't have that choice." she rationalized.

"Ok, so it's about context. But why being bossed around in the, well, bedroom?" How he could say such a thing without blushing surprised him, but he did.

She actually took her time to think it over. As always, Harry was drawn into watching her worry her lip in thought. To him, it was the definition of cute.

"You know how I love to follow rules; it just extended into my romantic life. Also, I like the naughty feeling if I get punished for breaking a rule. I refrain myself from breaking any at home or at school because I don't fancy being punished by my parents or a professor."

"Oh yeah, this would certainly ruin your fantasies," he laughed, while deciding to not invoke any related pictures to that, ever. "But punishment? What exactly do you mean by that? Doing lines?" he joked.

Hermione couldn't prevent a snort at that. "No, you silly, usually punishment would be having to do something that is especially pleasurable for you. Or something which, while being slightly painful, also is pleasurable for me. Or something that feels good but makes me feel ashamed, as well."

"You lost me there, Hermione. The first thing makes a little sense, but the other ones? How would you do that?"

At that point, Hermione got scared. Dropping her gaze a little, she started responding, with a slight shiver in her voice that betrayed her brave façade. "Sometimes, pain or shame might increase the intensity of pleasure. Like getting your butt slapped while masturbating. Or pinching nipples. Or making me do indecent things in public... Are you disgusted with me now?"

She shot him a betrayed look as he snorted in laughter.

"Hermione," he softly spoke, after gulping heavily, "I'm a teenage male - there's no chance that my reaction to a pretty girl asking to practically be my sex slave would be one of disgust. That I promise you!"

He had to clench his teeth as a brown-haired missile launched herself at him, hugging him hard. Even magical pain potions had their limits. While she alternated between sobbing and asking if he really thought of her as being pretty, he just relished in the feeling of being held by her. It was as good as back in the bus, just with fewer clothes between them.

'Fewer is definitely better!'

"Hermione?" he asked after he had luxuriated in her touch for a few minutes.

"M-hmm?"

"I just wondered. Why are you that open with me? You know, talking about sex that casually with a girl is kind of strange. Not that I'm complaining..."

"Good question. I think the answer is easy. I trust you, and I am very sure that you are as much in love with me as I am with you. Also, since I practically forced my parents into giving me 'the talk' at the age of 8, we were always outspoken about love and sex in that house. Especially my mother and I are. Dad still tries to see at least a bit of his baby girl in me, ignoring all evidence to the contrary, so I spare him the juicy talks." She responded. "Most of them," she added with an evil grin, wiggling her eyebrows.

"So basically, I treat you just as any other member of my family." Hermione concluded, not knowing what exactly she just had told him. "But I'm sure you realise that my feelings for you go beyond family, I mean I'm pretty sure I'm in love with you, after all." Feeling him shiver, she looked at him curiously.

"Harry? What's wrong? Did I hurt you?" she shouted as she saw tears streaking down his face freely. In response, he just hugged her tighter, and buried his face in her neck, inhaling her scent, his hot breath at her neck making her shiver.

"That was the first time that anybody had included me in his family. Sirius spoke of me living with him and the Weasleys joked about making me an honorary Weasley sometimes, but you just told me that you actually see me as a family member already," he responded, between sniffles and sobs, before breaking down into a good cry. All she could do was to hug him and smile while he cleansed his soul on her shoulder for a long time, probably for the first time ever.

When he was finished, he suddenly barked a laugh. "You know, that makes another first time. You were the first who I remember hugging me, back in first year, and last year, you were the first to ever kiss me."

"I was not!" Hermione huffed. "That was Cho, earlier this year!"

"Honestly, that kiss from Cho doesn't count. She was crying and started mashing her lips on mine while she sobbed even harder. I don't know what a kiss is supposed to be like, but certainly not like that. I mean the kiss on the cheek at Kings Cross when we went home last year," he told her off, and a giggling Hermione snuggled into his shoulder even more, while she promised herself to take care of several other first times, should the occasion arise.

A bit later, Harry noticed that Hermione had relaxed against him, dozing lightly. Falling asleep as well, he didn't have the heart - or the will - to send his cuddly bedmate away. As he wiggled himself into a lying position, she woke up and began to slowly extract herself from his bed. Having nothing of that, he held her fast, shooting her a lopsided grin. 'Gryffindors charge!' He thought.

"No way, my little lady. Since I am bed-ridden because of you, the least you could do for now is making me comfortable. Your parents gave me free pass for everything, so you will stay as my cuddly pillow for tonight."

For a split second, he thought he had crossed the line. He had actually ordered her to spend the night with him. He felt her stiffen, and saw the colour racing into her cheeks. But then, she gave him a bright smile, and nodded.

Still smiling through her own yawn, she slipped out of her kimono and crawled under the sheet, snuggling into his shoulder.

"Sleep well; I'll continue your punishment tomorrow", he whispered and chuckled as he felt her purr in to his shoulder. 'This commanding business is not to bad,' he thought, as sleep finally claimed him

Later that night, a door creaked as it was opened slightly. There was a bright smile and a deep chuckle, and one ten pound note changed hands.

"I told you they would still be dressed, darling", a female voice whispered.

"I think I have to show you again what happens if you dare to be right about something, wench", a soft baritone threatened.

That was followed by a soft click of a door closing, some feet dashing off into the distance and a faint 'Squee!' some seconds later.

Hermione had briefly stirred, but only pulled herself closer to her warm pillow, without ever losing the smile on her face.

AN:

"The voices! Can't you hear them? They keep screaming at me; they're pleading, begging! And they want more - it's never enough; they always want more!" The man yelled frantically as the orderlies wrestled him into the straight jacket.

Shaking her head, the nurse left the padded cell, meeting the doctor outside. "That poor man," she sighed. "What happened to him?"

"It's a complicated story," the doctor replied with a sad shake of his head as he ticked some marks on the patient's sheet, transferring him to the closed ward of the asylum.

"According to his wife, this began quite innocently: He signed up on a Fan fiction Authors website..."

Since everybody starts harping at me, I have to make an extra disclaimer:

NO - Hermione is not going to turn into a controlled submissive. She stays the same bossy know-it-all she is.

Guys/Gals! She's just a bit into kink! Geez!

Singled out minions:

FluffyNevyn/msgupy: I'm cruel... Where would the fun have been if I warned you in advance?

Emerald Demona: Thank you. I feel Remus and Tonks are the most realistic couple JKR had written. Younger girl digs for the interesting older man who would go for it if he hadn't qualms about his health and the age difference. It sucks that she had killed them both off.

Bexis1: there's nothing new under the sun, except for my plot. Stay tuned...

dougal74: I'm sorry. I cut it there because I had to split that chapter into length somewhere, and I thought this point would be the nicest. From now on, I promise to cliffy each and every chapter properly. Say 'Thank you' to dougal, everyone... -}

All readers:

Thank you VERY much for recognizing my efforts to make the changes I make believable. I personally LOATHE stories that don't come up with a reasonable way to do plot-changing. Sometimes, a flap of a butterfly wing could be enough to change things significantly along the way. Rest assured that there will be a huge difference a few chappies down my line... I hope you'll like what my twisted psyche has come up with.

Chapter 6: Reaching the next level.

*** June 30th, 1996, Granger residence ***

The next morning, Harry woke up with a strange feeling. It was different, yet known, like a room missing one tiny piece of decoration. The first difference he noticed was that there was something lying on his right arm. Something with plenty of bushy curls on it.

Comparing those curls with some samples from his memory, he identified the object in question. Basking in the feeling of sweet joy flowing through him at the memory of last night, he tried to stay still, lest he woke her and ended that sweet moment of bliss.

Concentrating, he noticed another sensation, or more precisely, the lack of one. He was not in pain. That was certainly good, but for some reason, the permanent tiredness that he had felt all his life was gone as well. Harry wasn't sure what Hermione had ended up brewing for him but he couldn't help but hope she'd made plenty for the future as well. 'Whatever it was, the stuff worked great!'

His joy from earlier was transformed into near ecstasy as Hermione shifted, burrowing deeper into his shoulder. In doing so, she had pressed her body closer to his. Her scantily clad body, at that. Harry marvelled how soft her legs felt as they curled themselves over his own. Fighting the natural response became a futile exercise as he noticed something else very soft being pressed into his side with her next move.

Just as his arousal was beginning to show, a sound caught his attention. Someone had just cleared his throat.

Two things happened at the same time. Hermione's relaxed form beside him stiffened, while his natural reaction did the opposite.

Hermione had been happy waking up in the position in which she found herself that morning. Not only had she slept free from nightmares for the first time since the battle at the Ministry, but she had also awoken in the arms of her hero. She assumed that Harry's presence next to her had kept her personal demons at bay that night. He had woken her though, with the tensing of his body, and Hermione assumed that he was awake now, watching her as she slept.

The feel of his skin against hers and was intoxicating and even as she thought it, there was another sensation; it was a strange but familiar feeling. Like a book on the wrong shelf. Shelving that thought and smiling at the pun, she wiggled herself closer to the boy next to her. The increased contact sent a thrill of pleasure through her and she nearly sighed, but realised she was pretending to be asleep. She refrained from giving herself away and simply luxuriated in the feeling of comfort that he provided. However, she soon began to feel proof for her theory of his awareness.

While she was breathlessly waiting to find out how much 'proof' there would be, her research project was cancelled by a known sound. Her dad was clearing his throat.

As a horrified Harry was grabbing for his glasses to identify the blots of colour he could see at the door, she cursed her parents briefly - and silently - and then vocally wished them a "Good morning! Slept well?"

She squeaked and turned around at near light speed, clenching the sheet to her chest as Tonks replied with a happy "Not as well as you, Hermione!"

Nearly dropping his glasses in shock, Harry found himself wishing for a Death Eater attack for the first time in his life. As Voldemort proved to be as unhelpful as ever, he decided to 'pay the piper', as they say.

"Good morning, Mister, Misses Granger, Tonks," he pressed out through clenched teeth, before, with a groan, adding "Professor Lupin" to his litany. At least they all wore grins, thus making corporal harm improbable.

"Good morning, you two. It's good to see that Harry is well cared for. Though I hope he doesn't complain about your bedside manner, Hermione," Henry said with a chuckle, prompting the girl to flush slightly at the implications.

Remus and Margret just grinned teasingly, but Tonks couldn't let a possibility like that go to waste.

"Well, I would have bet money on you going Florence Nightingale on him, Hermione, but I did not expect you to use the Marvin Gay approach."

While everyone started chuckling at the Nightingale reference, the second part got people confused.

"And when I get this feeling, I need sex-ual-heeeealing" Tonks broke into song, swaying seductively, totally ignoring the groans erupting all around her.

The adults completely lost it when Harry blurted "But we didn't do anything!" while Tonks half sang, half moaned "Baaaaaaaaa-hey-byyyy" in a quiet background voice, still swaying like a pole-dancer.

The following minutes were spent with the laughing Grangers calming Harry down with reassurances that everything was fine between them, Hermione huffing at everyone from under the sheets, and Remus rolling on the floor as a laughing Tonks repeatedly broke into song with different parts of the lyrics.

After the proverbial Mickey was completely extracted from the teens, real topics were brought up to the foreground, again.

The first item was to send Hermione to go and dress, since the healer would arrive anytime now, and she probably won't like to meet him in her pyjamas.

Then a now very disappointed Harry was put under close scrutiny. What the common eye had noticed was confirmed as soon as Healer Josephus Brown, whose arrival had quelled the beginning discussion, had taken a few minutes for various tests.

"I don't really know why exactly you fetched me. He is a bit banged up, but nothing a few days taking it slow wouldn't fix." he pronounced, earning a few unbelieving looks. "What?"

"Josey, just yesterday that lad was a single living bruise, worse than anything I've ever suffered during a transformation" Remus elaborated, ignoring the outburst from said boy, "and now you tell us that after only one healing potion and a night's sleep ..."

"In the arms of his girl," Tonks sniggered, which made Hermione protest.

"Ok, after one good night's sleep," a grinning Remus corrected, again ignoring Harry's protests, Hermione's squeak, and the laughter of the other participants, "this guy is completely ok? That's a miracle, I need 2 days to bounce back from less, and I'm a werewolf! How could that happen?"

"What exactly caused these injuries?" the Healer asked.

After some glances were exchanged and the healer had pointed out that his oath meant that he would keep confidence, he was filled in about the blood wards.

"Okay, first of all, I would like to check his Hammerstein index," the healer stated.

"That measures the size of his magical core," Tonks added for the Grangers' benefit.

"Why? Do you believe his core might be damaged?" Remus asked, concerned.

"Oh, no, I can assure you his reserves are rather full," Healer Brown replied, "I just would like to have some measurements before I start spouting theories."

After a complicated wave of the healer's wand, a glowing 83 hovered over Harry's chest.

"Not too shabby!" the healer whistled, while the other wizards gaped. "No wonder he's healing that fast."

Harry's face fell. "Dammed," he softly whispered, "I hoped it would rise after those dammed wards were removed."

Bedlam followed. Healer Brown was staring, Tonks and Remus were spouting expletives and Hermione was rattling off questions at Harry. This went on for several seconds, until Henry made everybody stop with a bellowed "SILENCE!"

"Much better. Now, would anybody be so nice and explain this to us mere mortals?" he continued, indicating himself and his wife.

"Sorry, Dad," Hermione apologized, while Tonks already started explaining.

"Mr. Granger – Henry - what makes a human a wizard is his magical core. The core is the magical reserves of a wizard. Think of it like a well: you can take water out, and more seeps back in from the sides. Its size and thus, the wizard's power varies greatly. That index measures the available power in a wizard's or witch's core. The average is about 60, but that index is not linear, since in magic, one and one is greater than two. A wizard with a 50 is a lot more powerful than a wizard with a 40."

"Think of it as 'to the power of' or logarithmic, Dad," Hermione assisted.

"Thank you, as least I think so," Tonks said, eyeing Hermione warily as she took over again.

"So Harry having a power of 83 makes him a more powerful wizard than the average. At his age, he's probably the most powerful student in Hogwarts. Even outside, there are not many adults who will surpass him. Dumbledore is legendarily powerful, said to be ranged in the low 120's, but Harry will easily add a ten or two to his index while he grows up, so he is extremely powerful. I, for one, am a 79, so he's already surpassed me, and I'm a power-house in the squad."

"62" Hermione said, as her father glanced in her direction, and Remus added a "58" without prompt.

Henry was satisfied with that. Harry wasn't.

"Oh come on, I'm not that powerful. All the time in school, I've had to struggle to keep up. If I were that powerful, it wouldn't be that hard for me to cast spells. And Pomfrey checked me every time I was under her care. I was a 74 after Voldemort's resurrection, and a week ago, after the battle, I was already an 83. I had thought my index would rise heftily after we get rid of those bloody wards."

"Ok," the healer began, before clearing his throat. "As much as that story defies pretty much all that I know, you do have a certain reputation for doing the impossible, Mr. Potter." While saying that, he waved his hand towards the scar on Harry's forehead.

"So, if I may, I'd like to try a theory that might fit the facts. It's a shot into the blue, but we might as well try. Is there any continuous spell you could cast which takes a lot of power?"

After Harry had grinned at him and nodded, he continued. "Great, now I'd like you to do so using this wand; it will prevent any underage magic from being detected, preventing any warning you might otherwise receive, while I cast some charms on you. And please use as much power as you can," he asked, while removing a wand box from his bag.

While every other magical person in the room started chuckling in anticipation, Harry grinned and grabbed the offered bright red wand from the healer. With a wink at Hermione, who blushed brightly, he scrunched his face up in happy concentration and swished the wand toward the empty part of the room.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

To his defence, it should be said that Healer Brown was professional enough to only stare a few seconds at Harry and the enormous, bright stag the boy had produced. Hermione's parents took much longer. The gorgeous creature was nearly twice the size of a man, barely fitting into the room - actually, its antlers were partly penetrating the ceiling already. The feeling of happiness it radiated was nearly palpable.

"Impressive, lad, now hold it as long as you can," prompted the Healer, and settled to watch Harry, whose face got contorted with agony while he apparently struggled to hold the silver animus alive.

"OUCH!" Twenty seconds and a failed attempt by Margret to pet the misty animal later Harry dropped the charm and the wand, which had started smoking at the tip. "Bugger me! That wand got bloody hot!" he explained.

"Well, it's a standard diagnostic wand, made for wide compatibility with nearly everyone. They are not as sturdy as usual wands.

Certainly not used for stuff as powerful as you just did. With that kind of magic, I'm surprised it didn't burn out." Healer Brown explained. Meanwhile, he carefully levitated the still smoking wand carefully back into its box.

"Mine doesn't get hot. Never has." Harry insisted.

"No? How strange. But let's take a reading, now," the Healer murmured and repeated the intricate pattern he had woven before. He dropped his wand in shock as, again, a glowing 83 appeared.

Remus had to steady Tonks, who showed signs of fainting, while Hermione shrieked "Impossible!"

To Harry, it was an extremely uncomfortable situation. While he had promised himself to accept himself as a talented, special someone, standing out still was something he didn't like. And according to the reactions of the others, he was standing out, again.

"In all my years... I never thought it would be possible..." Healer Brown murmured as he bent to pick up his wand, still in shock.

"Could you please tell me what I did this time?" Harry huffed.

Remus was the only one able to answer. "Harry, casting that Patronus for such a long time should have dropped your index at least thirty or fifty points and made you feel exhausted. But it didn't. We could see how you had to concentrate to keep it up. Was anything different to you?"

Harry paused a bit, pondering.

"Now, as you ask, yes. It was easier. Normally, I feel drained and tired while and after a Patronus charm. It had not been exhausting, not at all, just painful because the wand was getting hotter by the second. Right now, I feel like I could do it again without problem."

"You could. Easily," Hermione piped up. As everyone's head, except for the still shocked Healer, turned to her for an explanation, she laughed out loud.

"Honestly, don't you all see it? It's so clear, so obvious." At this, she straightened and itemized with the help of her fingers.

"He was under a blood ward, but still could cast. We had the theory that he somehow had more magic than the wards could absorb. We assumed it was his power level, but we were wrong. It all became clear when he told me that he felt drained back then, but now doesn't. Also, his power level didn't sink when put under stress. It's self-evident!"

A loud crash sounded behind causing her to notice that Tonks had truly fainted now, taking out a chair with her. The healer moved quickly, casting the necessary spells.

Soon Tonks was sitting up but she kept staring at Harry, the expression on her face was truly a comical one, she looked much like a fish out of water.

A grinning Hermione confirmed the Auror's conclusion. "Correct, Tonks. He replenishes his magic faster than a ward can draw it in. He could potentially hold his Patronus till kingdom come and then some, if he were inclined to."

"But how?" sputtered Tonks.

Healer Brown cleared his throat. "There is a very obscure discipline in Arithmacy which might explain this. I do not want to bother you with details," he said, not noticing Hermione's pout at his proclamation, "but it is called 'Fluidal Magic' and describes the way magic flows."

"You see, every core has a limit, like a barrier. As mentioned, it works like a well. You take water out of it and it replenishes, but there is a certain rate at which it can come out of and seep back into the well. Theoretically, there is the possibility of something like a super-recharging core. It is akin to a river flowing directly through the well, refilling it faster than you can possibly drain it. Even the blood wards could only take so much per time unit, so they left Harry at a normal recharge level."

"So basically Harry is plugged into the power grid, while all others run on batteries?" Henry asked; which Hermione confirmed with a nod in his direction, but didn't explain the meaning of the muggle terms to the others. This was highly unusual for Hermione, but could be explained mostly by the brilliant smile that just about split her

face, which spread across the room as everybody else also came to terms with what this meant.

Remus was the first to vocalize it.

"The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord..."

"Wow!" Tonks said.

"Yeah, that word is used a lot in connection with Harry. Like back in his third year, when he drove away hundred Dementors with one Patronus." Remus added.

Hermione of course had a question. "How did he do that if the wards drain him to a mere mortal level?" she asked - earning herself a sharp reprimand by said proclaimed deity, which everyone present blatantly ignored.

"That's a rather daunting question, young lady," Healer Brown said with a grim smile, "I can think of two plausible theories. One, the wards could have sensed the imminent danger to Harry defected temporarily, allowing him to use his full power and thus preventing their own destruction, and when it was safe again they'd reattach themselves to Harry quite quickly. The better option, though, would be this: Mortal danger usually makes people do extraordinary things. It's completely possible that the person in question's magic could override the blood binds and close the connection until the danger had passed. So in keeping with this line of thought, in life or death situations Harry would have access to nearly all, if not all, of his potential." This last thought seemed to cheer the Healer up slightly and he smiled happily.

"You mean like those stories of people lifting cars to save people trapped underneath them?" Margret quipped in, finally finding a point of reference to which she could cling.

"Yes, something akin to that. Please mind that this is just an assumption by me, since all other people that had been subjected to that abhorrent thing usually were without wands, so they couldn't cast anyway. Of course, such overexertion would probably lead to unconsciousness due to the shock of magic rushing out of your already exhausted body when the bind is reactivated, but that would only happen after the danger has passed."

"Seems plausible to me - it would explain my usual dead faint every time I had a big adventure." Harry laughed. "At least I can now tell Pomfrey that I was right all the time. I really was okay - it was just the blood ward that made me faint. But still, even back then, my wand didn't get hot like yours!"

"That's strange, Harry," Remus said, "Every wand gets hot when casting magic, that is one of the universal laws of magic. There is always some residue of spells left in them. That's why we can cast *priori incantatem* on wands. My Patronus is nowhere near your level, but even my wand gets noticeably warm when I cast it. Mind if I take a look at your wand?"

In a few seconds, Hermione had gotten Harry his wand from his discarded clothes on his trunk, and he had handed it over, handle first, as they were taught to do, to Remus. Remus grabbed it gently, and immediately frowned.

"Strange. Normally there is a feeling to a wand, a reaction when you touch it. With this wand, I feel nothing."

"Lumos!" he called, with no effect.

"LUMOS!" He incanted again, louder this time, but nothing happened.

After Tonks and Healer Brown had tried and failed, too, they returned the wand to a frowning Harry.

At the first sound of 'lumos', the wand instantly lit with an immensely bright light, which was quickly nox-ed by Harry, sheepishly apologizing, while the others were blinking the spots out of their sight. "Oops!"

After people had their eyesight restored and were collectively wondering why the wand had worked for Harry, but not for Remus, Tonks suddenly perked up and gazed at the window. For a few seconds, she waited calmly while the other people started talking, and finally let out a desperate groan, causing all conversation to cease and everyone to focus on her.

"Harry? May I try something?" she asked, ignoring all the questioning glances. "Would you please close your eyes, and then cast a lumos again when I give you my wand?"

Harry agreed, she quickly blindfolded him with a large handkerchief she conjured, and Harry felt a slim wand pressed into his hand. Without hesitation, he cast the spell and heard a common gasp. 'Dammed, too bright, again," he thought, concentrating on reducing the power flow.

After a short pause, he heard Tonks ask if it felt different from his own wand. After a bit of consideration, he responded negatively, and was ordered to take the blindfold off.

For the next five seconds, give or take, he stared in shock at the ray of light the pencil in his hand emanated, just like everyone else had been doing.

"Yup, Harry, you probably burnt it out with that Patronus and have been casting wandless ever since. It came to me as I noticed no owl coming for underage magic." Tonks told him.

"ARRGH!" Hermione screeched, stomping her foot, drawing all attention to her.

"All that time, while I knew I was less powerful, I was proud to be at least faster at getting the spells down than Harry, and now it turns out he was casting wandless all the time! Honestly, is there no way to beat you, Harry?" she scolded him, before moaning in shame and hiding her face in her hands as all the adults guffawed at her outburst.

When everybody had calmed down, Healer Brown got serious and took a long look around. He sighed before turning to Tonks, pleading at her.

"Just be careful to not obliviate healer school from me, ok?"

After the healer was escorted out with his memories still intact, but oath-bound to silence, the whole group, including a now dressed Harry, migrated into the living room, where an impromptu party followed.

Room was sparse, but Hermione solved that particular problem by claiming Harry's lap as her seat, which received Harry's enthusiastic approval. About half an hour later, the teens were beginning to get accustomed to the teasing they received for it.

Before lunch, Margret took Harry aside and reassured him that she and Henry both approved of the relationship.

Henry, after a bit of reflection on the information about Harry's magical power, refrained wisely from the "angry father threatens the suitor" talk he had prepared years ago. Losing one good opportunity for joking paled in comparison to losing his life.

At lunch – pizza, this time, as the kitchen still resembled a battlefield - Tonks gave the report about the order's activities that she had promised to spy on.

"Well, first of all, they can't track you anymore. Dumbledore has started using search teams combing London and surroundings with a very fine-toothed one. Remus and I are currently assigned to keep watch at the Black Mansion. Since no one can enter, we are supposed to wait at the doorstep."

"Why can't you enter? I still know the address, so the secret is still around." Harry demanded.

"No one can, at least not until the new owner has claimed it and allowed people back in. Old Mansions are often protected that way. Most probably, you are the one in question. Come to think of it, it might be a good hideout, since no one would expect us to use it already. It's only a matter of time until Dumbledore gets wiser and comes looking for you here. I'm rather surprised that he hasn't already."

"Although that might be due to the state of his pet death eater," Remus interjected.

"Snape? What happened to him?"

"Well Harry," Remus continued, "the more important and funny question is, 'What happened to Voldemort?'. According to Snape, dear Tommy was forced to witness all of your ritual, and obviously without the help of painkillers. The other Eaters summoned Snape

and forced him at wandpoint to help Voldemort. Of course, even with that motivation, he was unable."

"Snape had a nervous breakdown after his return to Hogwarts," Tonks grinned. "The twins allegedly have pictures."

A lot of laughter was had, and Harry's vow to get a copy of those wasn't at all challenged by Hermione, or her parents. Even after her daughter's relatively toned-down reports of the Potions Master, her parents knew enough to appreciate justice due.

"What's the current status of Voldemort?" Margret asked. "It has been half a week since the ritual."

"Royally pissed off," Tonks snorted and continued recounting, her hair changing colour with every new sentence.

"According to the greasy git's latest reports, healers have been unable to do much for him. He is still alive, but his body has ceased to function correctly. He seems to need a few blood replenishing potions per day to stay healthy. Snape is being forced to find some potion to cure him or to improve the effect of the potions. The dark one is supervising and co-researching this, while all his men are leaving no stone unturned to find you, Harry. He is convinced that a repeat of the resurrection ritual would cure his predicament. Of course, he had vowed to use every last drop of your blood this time."

"Greedy bastard", Harry mumbled, attempting to cheer up the conversation. He had moderate success, eliciting some smiles all around.

Remus cleared his throat. "That brings up an important point. We are not safe here. Any day, either the Order or Voldemort might find us here. We should find some safer place." he stated.

"Any suggestions?" Henry asked.

Even before Remus had answered, Harry already knew what he was about to say. "Well, Harry has a house in London that's perfectly suited. Only Harry can allow entry, and only the Order can even see it."

"But mum and dad don't know the secret, they would not be able to come and go without one of us escorting them." Hermione objected. "They, and we, would be stuck in there."

"Nope; since it's now Harry's property, the secret has been transferred to him. He can tell it to anyone he chooses. Sirius could, too. The owner is always a keeper of the secret. Also, I believe the Black Library would suffice to keep you occupied for a while," Remus hinted, with a broad grin.

Harry took a long look at Hermione, who was staring into the distance and knew that he was outvoted. "Not fair, Remus!" he lamented, taking another look at his girl, who was currently wearing a dreamily smile, almost smitten. "And stop seducing my girlfriend!"

Hermione was brought back to reality by hearty laughter around her, and harrumphed as no one was forthcoming with an explanation of what she had missed.

*** Early afternoon, London, Grimmauld Place ***

"I'm still not sure that we should do that. It's Sirius's place." Harry said, for the umpteenth time, while kicking a piece of paper litter out of his path.

Remus sighed. He knew it would be hard for Harry, but they had to do this. It was imperative that they find a good hideout for his honorary nephew.

"Yes, it was, but he would have loved for you to have it and use it to thumb your nose at the Headmaster. You know how much he loved such stuff. Go on; try."

Harry's stomach was in knots. Although he knew that Sirius was dead, he still expected that old dog to jump out from behind some dumpster and yell "Surprise!"

Only his girlfriend's hand in his kept him from turning and walking away. After all the hassle of being apparated here by Remus and Tonks, he could at least try.

Remembering his dream, he hoped that Sirius had truly found the afterlife he had wanted, and reached out to the serpent doorknob.

"I, Harry James Potter, claim possession of Black Manor."

Instead of some amazing light show, a gong sounding in the distance, or sparks running over the door frame, the only response was an anticlimactic click. The door slowly swung open, granting him entrance into Number twelve's not so spotless premises. A slight waft of decay was in the air. Harry naturally felt uncomfortable with that.

"Remus! Tonks! Take a look!" Harry spoke and motioned for the adults to look ahead.

As both ran into an invisible wall at the last step, Harry remembered a certain fact. After taking over a warded property, the owner had to allow other people entry. In case of Black Manor, the only way was through the door, since the wards did not allow any apparition or portkeys in. He would later have to open the Floo for them.

"Remus Lupin and - sorry for this, Tonks - Nymphadora Tonks are allowed to enter Black Manor. I also grant entry to Hermione, Henry, and Margret Granger." He hastily said after stepping aside, thus enabling his friends to pass the door. He would have to tell them the address later, now that he had control of the wards.

After a quick search, the source of the stench was identified as the remains of Kreacher, decaying in his hidey-hole. That locket they failed to open and believed to have thrown away had burnt a hole through his chest, and was resting on the ground under him, open wide, next to a molten disk of flat metal that Hermione identified as the chain that was attached.

Not even Hermione could chastise Harry for being happy that he now wouldn't be forced to take Kreacher's life himself.

Tonks was the first to point out that a Manor this size was not sustainable without the help of at least one house-elf, wondering where they could get one.

"Dobby!" Harry said suddenly as he remembered a possible candidate, and "Arrgh!" was his next word as the tiny creature immediately appeared and asked for his wishes.

"Sorry, Dobby, you scared me," Harry began talking, but stopped immediately, taking a long look at the house-elf before him.

"Why are you so black?"

In fact, the tiny creature was covered in soot all over, except for only his big eyes, making them stand out even more than usual.

"The other elves and Dobby is cleaning one version of the come-and-go room. There has being a fire in there two days ago, and we is still cleaning, Master Harry Potter, Sir," he replied eagerly.

"After two days?" Hermione inquired.

Dobby nodded, making his ears flap, forming a small cloud of soot around his head.

"There is have being a lots of magic objects being in there, Miss Master Harry Potter's Grangy, Miss. The fire was being very hot."

Tonks and Remus winced at that. Most magical people had firsthand experience with how bad a magical fire could be. And most would rather forget about that.

"Oh, sorry to hear about that. But anyway, I would like to hire your services, if you would like to." Harry continued, remembering his original intentions.

"Dobby is sorry, but Dobby can't, Master Harry Potter, Sir."

"Oh, too bad - maybe you know a house-elf who would like to work for me?" Harry replied sadly.

"Dobby knows one who would, if she could be bound to Master Harry Potter, Sir. Winky is extremely unhappy in Hogwarts and would like to have a family to serve to." Dobby answered happily, and took a glance left and right, before he added, "Dobby would need her to keep this house clean, it's too big for Dobby alone."

Harry had already opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again and looked at Dobby.

"Ahem, Dobby, didn't you just say that you can't work for me?"

"No, Master Harry Potter, sir. Dobby was saying that he can't be hired for work by his Master, now that wouldn't be proper," the small elf said, shaking his head in a no-no gesture.

At this point, Hermione was completely lost. And wherever she had arrived at, Harry was there already, waiting for her.

"But Dobby, Harry freed you. Why is he your Master?" she tried, again.

"Miss Master Harry Potter's Grangy, Miss, Dobby became bound to Master Harry Potter, Sir, when he was taking orders from Master Harry Potter, Sir, in the come-and-go room and chose to obey. Dobby was never happier in his whole life - Dobby would do everything to please his Master!"

True to form, Dobby was bouncing on his toes at his last sentence, producing a black cloud wafting around him.

Hermione was trying to glare at Harry, but his grin and wink told her that he knew another person who was willing to do anything her master wants. Her blush was inevitable when he pulled her close and whispered into her ear.

"You know that I would never punish anybody other than you."

"We need to talk, Harry!" she whispered back while trying to suppress her shudder. "Later," she added, as a cough demanded their attention.

"When you two are done whispering sweet nothings into your ears, we could move on and hire that other elf Dobby talked about," Tonks interjected, "and then we would be ready for maybe a visit in Diagon Alley or Gringotts. You need some stuff, Harry!" she proclaimed, noticing that Harry wore his school uniform in lieu of proper clothes.

After getting - well, cajoling - an okay out of Hermione, Harry had Dobby fetch Winky. The tiny elf was visibly drunk, but had at least cleaned up a little since the last time Harry and Hermione had seen her. After being accepted as servant, she instantly cried tears of happiness on Dobby's shoulder, while the little fellow awkwardly patted her back, looking around uncomfortably.

"Ok, you both take care of this house. No punishing yourselves; if you do something wrong, you bring it to me and I decide, ok? And call me Harry."

Both elves stared at him, shocked to the core. "May we be calling you Master Harry, at least?" Dobby cautiously asked, wringing his hands, to which Harry agreed, much to Dobby's relief. Winky had to try a few times before she managed to address him that way, and the long pause every time she addressed him in her speech made Harry suspect that she still said the other words, just silently. At least he didn't have to hear them anymore.

With a broad grin, he ordered the elves to silence and dispose of Mrs. Black's portrait as their first task, which took the elves an ear-splitting half-hour battle against the portrait's enchantments, but practically doubled or tripled the estate's value.

AN:

DerLaCroix smoothly changed hands as he continued to paddle embirsiphonelilathia's butt with a table-tennis bat as the girl yelped and cried into her gag. She had only herself to blame for her current predicament, being tied over a barrel and having her arse polished to a mirror finish - after all, she had again tried to persuade him that Snape was actually a nice guy, and only had a bad childhood.

If he knew that his looks were so appealing to women, DerLaCroix would have stuck his head into a vat of axle-grease, too.

He sincerely hoped that he could beat it out of her. And if not, there was a lot of fun to be had in the process. Maybe he could ask that other Author to lend him some of her power tools to aid in her re-education...

Again, many thanks to pfeil for his work as lector. He's doing a great job. She-whose-butt-glowed did a great job, too - if only she would stop lusting after the greasy bat...

Special Attention/Rant:

Thank you everyone for supporting me, and my ideas, and actually reading what I wrote.

To be clear, there will be no oathbound slaves or what ever in this fic - I hate that cliché. The only good stories using that a satire. The others are usually written by members of the AYVB (angry young virgin brigade) and more porn than plot.

Again, thank you all for appreciating the hard work I put into my stories to make the plot work and believable, even if they might not be your cup of tea...

Also, for those who don't get it - Florence Nightingale Syndrome stands for patient and nurse falling in love with each other.

I blatantly stole the Hammerstein index from somewhere, it was a good invention of somebody I don't remember, and I have seen it in many fics. Thanks to the creator.

Singled out minions:

mwinter1/peruser: He's got to get Harry and his blood first...

stealacandy and Keronshara get the internet cookie for finding the hidden mistake in the chapter. Of course, it was Margret talking, not a Helen. Helen is the evil twin of Margret from another dimension, and was sent back there.

pyroseyes - Boy, they just got together - let them a bit time to enjoy the awkwardness of being kinky but relatively clueless. Remember, this story has kink only as a side dish, not as the main course...

gms – according to what cloneserpents had got away with in his fabulously funny fiction Harry Potter and the Sword of Gryffindor, I don't think that I will get in trouble for being too explicit. I'm much tamer than he is. And yes, that is an endorsement to read it, it's funny as hell.

oldgreyone – my first instinct was to rant at you. But I'll agree; you are right. Kink is nothing to base a relationship on. But neither is normal sex. After 16 years with my wife, I know that, believe me... But I don't think you honestly believe that there is only sex between Harry and Hermione.

On the other hand, most divorces I know have started with the lack of sex. So while it's not the basis, it's an important ingredient, among general caring for the other and never taking them for granted.

So forgive me my rant, everybody, and give your significant other an extra kiss today.

Chapter 7: Declaring the rules

June 30th, 1996, Grimmauld place, mid afternoon

Finally, the little group of Remus, Tonks, Harry and Hermione were left on their own. They moved into Black Manor's drawing room to discuss the events to follow.

"First, we must get you out of the Dursleys in a way which Dumbledore can't negate," said Tonks, cutting straight to the chase as always. "I have a proposal for you, now that we've confirmed that you are the heir to Lord Black, and thus Lord presumptive or 'Prince' Black until you reach majority. To get you away from the Dursleys, we need a guardian for that year, one with a better claim than Dumbledore, preferably family."

"Good plan, Tonks, but it ignores the tiny problem that I don't have any family left." Harry quipped.

"Don't talk like that to your aunt, Harry Potter-Black!" Remus chastised a dumbfounded Harry while the witches laughed at him.

"Yes, Harry, since you are a Black now, too, I could adopt you and have legal precedence over Dumbledore. Family has priority over Headmaster or Supreme Mugwump."

Some unshed tears were shining in Harry's eyes as she told him that.

"You would do that for me?"

"Of course, Sirius spoke the world of you, and I think you are a great guy. Pity I like my men a bit older, so no worries, Hermione." She shot a wink at Hermione, and turned back to Harry.

"If you want, we could file the papers as soon as we have the Dursleys give you up. Would you want - ooof!"

A happy Harry launching himself at her and hugging her for all he was worth and she answered to that question quite clear. Of course, being Tonks, that led to both of them falling off the couch in a tangle of limbs. Only after some rolling around and some failed attempts to untie their limbs were they able to separate themselves again.

"At least I had quick roll with you before it would become incest," Tonks laughed while Remus lifted her back onto her feet.

"Stuff it, auntie!" Harry grumbled good-naturedly. "Ok, how do we get the Dursleys to accept? Wandpoint?" He secretly hoped that he would get permission to do that.

"Nope. If we did that, it would be objectionable at court. We ask, and then we bribe. Bribing only carries a fine and is not enough to lodge an appeal. And just to be clear on that, according to the family tree, I'm your niece, old man," Tonks said as she stuck her tongue out at Harry.

"Pity. From where do we take the money? I only have about twenty thousand gallons in my vault. Is that enough?"

In terms of money, Harry was still very naïve. He never had any money to himself, only a few galleons pocket money at school. Mrs. Weasley always handled his school purchases. All he knew about money was that his school expenses account - for 7 years of schooling - contained about 20 000 gallons the last time he had heard a number.

A combined snort answered his question. Everyone in the room just gaped at him, as if he had just said to 'only' have a million in his cookie jar. In some way, he just had.

"If you only try to buy the house, you will be fine, Harry," Hermione said while patting his back. It took all that she had to not break down in laughter as she saw his confused face. Since no one else had recovered enough to clarify the issue, she took mercy on him and explained it to him.

"That's about five hundred or more thousand Pounds worth. It should suffice, especially since I believe the Dursleys will be as glad to part ways as you are. And no, it wouldn't matter to me if you were poor. But being rich makes living a bit easier, and who am I to mope over a rich boyfriend?" she added, in a perfect Lavender Brown imitation.

Instead of laughing, Harry's expression turned into one of even more confusion.

"But that is my school vault! Why would I have such a large amount available?"

Looking around, he saw people laughing, and frowned at them.

"Don't pout, Harry. It's just too funny... The heir to a well-off family... and adopted heir to one of the richest is asking why he has obscene amounts of pocket money? Classic - Sirius would never let you hear the end of this," Remus said between gales of laughter.

That laughter died when Harry started looking angry. As soon as his hair started flying in an unseen wind while small sparks discharged in the air around him, there was silence. In spite of the obvious danger, Hermione was brave enough to cling to him, cooing softly in his ear, while Remus and Tonks tried to apologize hastily.

Soon the pyrotechnics died down, and as soon as Harry seemed to have calmed down, they tried again to apologize, only to be waved off by Harry, who still held Hermione in his lap.

"Don't. I wasn't angry at you. I was angry that no one ever told me."

Remus nodded sadly. "Dumbledore; it all comes back to Dumbledore. I still can't believe what he's done. Seems like whenever we turn around, there's another lie to be discovered. We need to be quick. Best we empty your vault today and stack it in here so he can't use it against us. We might be able to get some from the Black vault, too, depending on the access clause in the will. All we need is your key and a signed request to have the Black key sent to you. We should do this before we visit the Dursleys, just in case."

As soon as that was said, Harry grew quiet, which was bothering Hermione. She pushed a bit away and asked him what was going on.

"You know how I left there. I don't expect a friendly welcome back, and even more, I don't want any. I just hope that I can keep my temper in check and that I don't hurt them badly. It might be best if I don't see them at all."

"In fact, that is a very good idea," Tonks noted. "The best would be if you both stay here. Remy and I are more than capable of

negotiating the terms, and if only half of what I heard and fear is true, your absence would certainly help, if only by sparing me from having to clean up after you. Cleaning up after my own hexes is ok, but you're old enough to not need me as a housekeeper anymore, young man!" she told them, while morphing her face into McGonagall's.

Later, while the adults were away on their errands, Harry and Hermione found themselves with some time on their hands before retiring to sleep. Hermione led the way straight into the library, of course, but sat with Harry on one of the couches there, instead of browsing the shelves.

"Harry, please promise me that Ron will never learn of what I am going to do next!" she pleaded, and after a grin and nod from Harry, she dug into her bag and produced a well-worn paperback novel, small and only a thumb thick. She then handed it to a visibly disappointed Harry. Noticing his small frown, she giggled happily, and gave him a peck on the cheek, too.

A bit mollified, Harry inspected the book closer, and promptly stifled a laugh, which turned into a painful snort.

"Secret indeed! The Corsair's Captive! If Ron ever knew about this, you'd never hear the end of it, no matter how long you lived. He would try to have it engraved into your tomb just to keep the knowledge alive!"

Slightly embarrassed, Hermione giggled again, a sound which Harry had begun to love. Who would have known that Hermione could be that girly sometimes? He was smiling at her, and she shot him a dazzling smile in return before responding.

"Yes, I thought akin those same lines, so please keep it secret. This is, in fact, my favourite story, and I thought that if you read it, you would know what I want. That way I wouldn't have to explain it, and trust me, that book is much fun," she said, blushing at the last sentence.

Harry took a short peek into the middle, and with a squeak, slammed the book shut again, staring at Hermione, who ducked her head and made an effort to resemble a brown-haired tomato.

"You don't expect me to read that stuff in here, with you around, don't you?" Harry asked, his voice still squeaky.

"Well you don't need to, but I thought you might, because if you had any questions, I could help you." Hermione offered, trying to put on an innocent face, but failing most spectacularly.

Harry cleared his throat and looked at the girl in his lap, noticing that her eyes were sparkling with mischief. She was teasing him! He decided to let out his inner prankster to get his own revenge - after all, it had worked quite well the previous time. 'Why not try again?' he thought to himself. She was simply trying to goad him anyway and two could play at that game, couldn't they? As he contemplated his revenge, he was struck by the realization that before this summer and the events surrounding it, he would have been too nervous to do anything like this. Yes, without that, the scenario would be much different.

'Hell yes, Hermione wouldn't be curled up on my lap for one, and if she tried, I would probably have bolted out of the room, and been half way to Ireland by now,' he thought with a chuckle. Somehow though, since he had left the Dursleys and participated in the ritual, he noticed he had become bolder and more assertive. He was more sure of himself now - so sure that it was bordering on recklessness, sometimes. With that thought in mind, he leaned forward and placed his mouth near Hermione's ear, parting his mouth to whisper.

"What if I decide that you should help me with the results?" he prompted, his lips ghosting over her ear, earning a squeak from her while she tried to burrow her face in the crook of his arm. Grinning broadly, he watched as Hermione's complexion altered from red to white and back a few times.

Finally, he couldn't bottle up his laughter anymore. Hermione harrumphed and sat up, swatting his arm repeatedly with both hands, before succumbing to laughter, too.

After they had calmed down, Hermione grew pensive for a moment, and then serious. Taking Harry's hands in hers, she took a deep breath and addressed him, looking straight into his eyes.

"Actually, if you ordered me to do so in the right way, I might – mind you I said might - be inclined to do it, but I'm fairly certain that

neither of us is ready for that to happen right now." Her cheeks were still a little pink from earlier and he couldn't help but think it was cute.

Harry could only nod as he looked at her. Deep inside he knew that their relationship had progressed nicely, but they hadn't reached that point just yet. Though given the speed at which they had advanced, it might be sooner than most people would think, but not yet.

"You're right; we aren't ready. I'm sorry, I didn't want you to think I might push you into doing something you don't want to do!" he responded in a small voice, which earned him a big hug and a peck on the cheek. Harry couldn't help but sigh in relief as the last of the built up tension left him - he would never forgive himself if he drove her away by being stupid.

"You never would, Harry. And even if you tried, I would draw a line at the things I'm not ready for yet. We just play a game, and I will only play along with things I want to do, remember? And be informed that I very much like this new, assertive Harry you've become since the ritual. I never knew you could be such a rascal!"

"So you noticed, then?"

"Honestly, Harry!" she laughed. "That morning I awoke in your arms, I could sense your presence! Ever since, you've been radiating confidence. Everyone senses it."

Harry paused a moment to remember that morning. His first thought was how he missed the feeling of waking up beside her. That was really nice. Banishing that thought for the moment, he reflected a bit about the changes the ritual brought.

"Yes, it's like, well, somehow being whole again. All my life, there was this constant fatigue, this pressure on me which I now know was just that ward. Now, I'm feeling like I could do everything; It's amazing, and it's you I have to thank for it," he said, while squeezing her hand and then lifting it to his mouth for a gentle kiss, making her smile softly at him.

"You're welcome."

After some moments of comfortable silence, Harry looked at the book and then back at Hermione. Taking a deep breath, he asked the most pressing question on his mind.

"You said we need to talk, I think now would be fine. What exactly do you expect me to do in our relationship? Like I said, I do not want to push you, but since you expect me to push you to a certain degree, I'm a bit confused, you know?"

"Oh! Right, that might be a bit confusing for a boy, being dense and all," she grinned, to which Harry reacted as any mature man would have: He poked his tongue at her. Hermione gracefully poked her own at him and continued.

"Well, basically you can do whatever you want. Since you aren't that experienced and are just not the type to rush things, I do not believe that you'll try to take advantage of me."

Feeling very relieved by seeing Harry nod at that statement, she continued, "and I am certainly ok with almost everything you want, as long as clothes stay on, at least for now. In my opinion we have been dating for years already, and I know you pretty well, so we don't need that awkward dating phase, anyway."

"Agreed!" Harry laughed. "It would certainly be weird to somehow 'start dating' officially. You're right; we already have eaten nearly every meal together and hung around each other for so long, that basic dating can be checked off that list of yours."

"Also, since we already talk even about sex, I can't see how much more open we could get. Just be creative and bold, and I'll tell you if it's too much, okay?" Hermione added.

"Right in one!" Harry laughed, but suddenly got serious. "But if I happen to cross a line, tell me! You know, with you wanting me to force you to do stuff, misunderstandings might occur. I wouldn't like to cause a fight between us over this," he said, sounding worried.

Hermione gave him a bright smile for his attitude. Honestly, how could she not? "Yes, that might be the case. Especially once we get friskier," she said deep in thought, not noticing Harry blushing brightly at that statement. "The usual convention is to have a code word which means to stop immediately. "

"How about 'Hogwarts'?" Harry jokingly asked.

"Nope, I certainly do not want a word that ends with 'warts' anywhere near my love-life!" Hermione scolded her very naïve or just kidding boyfriend, laughing, "How about something that is 'in play', so it isn't that interruptive. You know, I might want you to keep going, only taking it slightly easier on me. How about 'Have Mercy'? That way, I can plead and play all I want, but if I plead for mercy, you know to stop. But still, I believe it will take a while before something like that will be needed."

"Ok, fine with me," a red-faced Harry answered, "but in my current state, I'd probably agree to everything you propose," he laughed.

"Also, I could try to give you subtle hints. Like saying 'Oh please, don't do that!' or something?" she said, waggling her eyebrows at him.

Harry laughed out loud. "You want to use subtle hints on a boy? Gee, I feel honoured that you believe I might get them." he quipped.

Hermione flicked her hair back and snuggled into his side. "I think with proper motivation, even boys can be trained." she said in a breathy voice, while walking her fingers up his arm, completely capturing his attention.

"Well, I certainly am motivated now," Harry softly said, placing a soft kiss on her head, making her laugh and wiggle against him. "And this book?"

"Basically, if you read the book, you will certainly have an idea of what I like; most of my fantasies derive more or less directly from that book."

"Oh, so it's a manual!" Harry laughed. "Great! Every girl should come with one. So, you're showing me the ropes, aren't you?"

Hermione gave in to giggles. "I do believe we should wait a little before we try that, don't you think?"

"Minx!" Harry quipped while fighting his blush, and leafed through a few pages. After a few seconds of reading, he gave a whistle. He

got one question in mind. He silently pondered if he should be that bold, but since she had encouraged him to be, he caught her attention and shot her a diabolical grin. "So, pray tell, how many times have you rubbed off to this book?"

"Harry!" she gasped, shocked.

Harry was enjoying this new game of teasing. "I asked you a question..." - he shuffled a few pages, looking up something - "...wench!"

Hermione closed her eyes and shuddered, then dropped her head in shame, whispering something unintelligible.

Harry was certainly not letting her off the hook that easily. "Full sentence, audible, and look me in the eyes while talking to me," he demanded.

Another shiver ran through Hermione as she straightened her pose and turned to face him. Her face was a bright red as she locked her eyes on his and she actually needed two attempts before her voice didn't fail her.

"I have masturbated easily a hundred times while reading that book," she finally stated in a very breathy voice that made Harry want to adjust his trousers.

After a short pause, she cheekily added, "You got that thing down pat, Harry, if everything does come as easily to you like that did, I'll be a lucky woman."

After looking casually at his watch, Harry told her in a bland tone "And for that cheek, we'll make it one hundred and one times," making her jump and gasp at his boldness.

"Dobby!" he called out, which completely confused Hermione.

As soon as the tiny creature arrived, he addressed Dobby, ignoring Hermione completely.

"Dobby? Which is one my room?"

"Master Harry, Sir is being sleeping in the Master's suite, first floor, last door to the right, Sir!" Dobby replied.

"Good, please give Miss Granger a room which shares a wall with my bedroom, and make it so that every little sound from her room can be heard in my room, but nowhere else. Please escort her up to her room now; she has some errands to do while I retire to my rooms for some light reading."

Waiting for a nod from the elf, he turned facing Hermione, and indicated her to follow Dobby, which she actually did, her face brightly lit. Dobby didn't ask a thing, he was just overjoyed to be of assistance.

A minute later, Harry stood and went to his room, which was basically an extra flat within the house, and prepared himself for the night. When he finally settled into bed and started reading his 'Hermione manual', a soft, laboured breathing began to emanate from the wall to his right.

Although the surroundings got increasingly distracting as time progressed, that evening's read was certainly the best of his whole life.

*** July 1st, Grimmauld Place, early morning ***

A very happy Harry walked down the stairs, heading to the kitchen for breakfast. As he entered the kitchen, he found Remus, Tonks and Hermione already seated there. Casually strolling by, he gently hugged Hermione and gave her a kiss on the temple, whispering a good morning into her ear, making her eyes bulge out and blush brightly. After greeting the others, he sat down next to her, helping himself to a huge breakfast courtesy of Dobby.

Tonks took a look at the size of his breakfast and at Hermione's rather full plate and began teasing.

"Any explanation for why you both feel ravenous this morning?"

"Growing teenagers?" Harry replied. "Sorry Tonks, no juicy gossip just yet."

"Really? Remy, what does your nose think?"

"Sorry Tonks, but no gossip this morning. I can smell them both on each other, but could be explained away by the fact that they're practically joined at the hip wherever they go. What are you expecting me to detect? If they were doing it a few minutes ago, then I could have smelt it on them, but come on – if they really did it, you could tell by their stupid grins anyway," the old werewolf quipped, prompting the two teens to turn a little pink.

Exhaling her held breath, Hermione quickly changed the topic. "Something new in the Prophet, Tonks?"

"I'll get a new boss, but I already knew that. Madam Bones is said to need at least half a year to completely recover from the failed attack at her home yesterday; some ads, some politics, oh, there had been a fire in one vault at Gringotts, but they state that there had been no loss of value, documents or life. And yes, that's the order in which the goblins do value things," she added as Hermione wrinkled her nose.

After Tonks had recounted a few more things from the paper, Harry inquired about the Dursleys. The way the adults went quiet did not encourage him at all.

"Well, we tried to do make them sign the adoption papers. They wanted to, really, but they couldn't," Tonks tiptoed around the topic.

"Let me guess, Dumbledore?" Harry sighed and dropped his head into his hands.

"Yes. He has them charmed so they can't give you up for adoption. Can you believe that? Anybody else would have a ticket straight to Azkaban for messing up muggle heads, but to try to have anything stick to him, it's like he's impervious. I think I should start avoiding the man before I can't resist the urge to hex him anymore," she hissed, getting more and more enraged as she talked.

"Can't you just finite them?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Sorry, luv, but it's a bit harder than that. And I would not like to tinker with any spell in their brains put there by Dumbledore. They should resemble something more than a vegetable if they have to sign any valid legal document." Tonks said, which made Harry

wonder how much difference actually was between Dudley and a vegetable, and the transfiguration steps needed to make that change happen.

"But we did get their written permission for you to stay with us for this and the next year's summer, so we do have the next best thing." Remus tried to calm him, while Hermione was rubbing Harry's neck with one hand.

"And how does that help?" he asked, trying not to melt under Hermione's caress.

"Basically, with that permission slip, if we get caught, we won't be arrested as kidnappers," Tonks answered, "So it does help against Dumbledore. Speaking of him, Hermione, your parents have told us that they will move in here this afternoon and bring your stuff with them. Since they had already taken vacation for the next four weeks, they won't be missed, anyway. Which brings us to the best part of today, Hermione: we'll go shopping with Harry!"

"Don't you have to go to work or something?" Harry asked, hoping to be spared that experience.

"No way, lover boy, I am scheduled for night shift today, so I have the whole day to help you out," she grinned at him, while Remus and Hermione chuckled.

Soon, breakfast was finished and the teens were sent up to dress for Diagon Alley. On the way back down, they met again, and Hermione was still grinning at Harry's predicament.

Of course, the new Harry was having none of that. "Still grinning from last night Hermione? I was under the impression that the only thing you overachieved in was your homework assignments; apparently I was wrong. I had only ordered for you do it once, didn't I?"

"Oh hush, you. I don't think you minded me getting carried away, as I know you were listening and counting apparently. You're just grumpy that you are in for a long shopping trip at our mercy," She responded, laughing at him.

Harry waited until they reached the top of the staircase before he pulled her into a tight hug and whispered into her ear. "That's where you're wrong love; I don't think I'm at your mercy. And just to prove that, if we spend more than an hour trying on clothes in any of the stores without getting a break, you'll go and find something to try on. We can test and see if you can increase your counter in the changing rooms, understand?" He nearly smirked at the shiver that shook through her body, resisting the temptation to tease her more.

With that, he separated from her and rushed down the stairs, yelling, "Coming yet, Hermione?" when she still stood up there, flushed and unbelieving. What kind of monster had she created?

Around 6 o'clock, the clothes hunters returned in triumph. Each of them carried two bags full of shrunken clothes, the first real wardrobe Harry had ever owned. Of course, he had insisted that Hermione get herself some things as well, especially dresses and swimwear, but most of it was his. The teens were in a brilliant mood, though Tonks was sulking.

They were greeted by the Grangers and Remus, who immediately noticed Tonks's mood.

"What's up? Was Harry that defiant?" Henry chuckled.

"If only! He was a picture-perfect model, no matter how long he had to try stuff, he never said one word, but Hermione continuously insisted on changing shops or having lunch breaks. She was adamant about it, even when Harry was agreeable to staying a bit longer at one shop." She complained, while Harry and Hermione exchanged a quick look, the first grinning broadly, the other blushing.

Margret raised an eyebrow at her daughter, and, deciding to ask later, left her suspicions unvoiced for now.

"Everything went fine with your move?" Harry asked.

"Just great, with Dobby and Winky, we had the house cleared out in a heartbeat. Those two are a gift from heaven." Margret gushed, while Henry noted that they would have come handy when they had moved in.

"Do you need some storage space for the furniture or is it shrunk?" Harry offered, but Henry waved off.

"Oh, no, we left most of it where it is. It wouldn't fit here and it's not that valuable. We just took the clothes, the important family stuff, and the valuable or keepsake things. We left the rest. It doesn't matter if something happens to that; it's well insured."

"Did you get everything?" Margret inquired, pointing at the bags. "That seems very little to me. I thought you were out for a full wardrobe?"

"Oh, it's more than it seems. The things in these bags are shrunk as much as your stuff. There are at least twenty of every article Harry needs in there, I take my shopping seriously," Tonks reassured Margret.

"It's a pity we couldn't go to Ollivander's to replace my wand. Or maybe repair my old one - I miss it. Even more since it was the only brother wand to Voldemort's," Harry moped.

"I told you that doesn't work; you can't just replace a core. The wand is gone. We can frame it for your wall if you like, but it's better you use it to delude others. And it's really disturbing how you whine about the brother wands - why do you want to have something in common with him, of all people?" Tonks inquired with a disgusted face.

"With brother wands, I have the protection the Priori Incantatem effect when I fight him," Harry informed her.

"Why would a wand echo help you against Voldemort?" Tonks laughed at him.

"Because when we duelled at his resurrection, the brother wands locked up and kept him from hexing me - the golden dome also kept the Death Eaters away from us," Harry hotly replied. Instead of acknowledging her ignorance, Tonks looked at him with concern.

"Are you feeling fine? Maybe we overdid the shopping a bit - the poor boy is talking in riddles. Maybe we should have waited a bit longer before we let you out of bed," she said, and Margret tried to feel his forehead.

Harry batted her hand away angrily. "I am fine. Don't you know that brother wands can't be used to fight against each other?" he said, but everybody just looked at him in confusion, even Hermione.

"And how would that work?"

Tonks raised an eyebrow at him. "Who told you that kibosh? That's the most insane thing I ever heard!" she said, and Harry rose to his defence, but slumped when he remembered the source.

"Think about it for a moment. My wand has a dragon heartstring," Tonks said, to which Hermione added a "Mine, too."

"See? Ollivander once said that he makes close to five hundred wands out of a single heart. This would mean that my wand would be useless against hundreds of others! And unicorn hair is nearly as bad, since there are only few of them. And while I heard stories about wands locking up occasionally, I've never seen anything like it," Tonks told him. "What exactly happened to make the wands lock up?" she asked as an afterthought?

"Our spells hit each other."

"Ok, that causes the weirdest effects, for sure," Tonks agreed. "I remember the time I hit someone with a jelly legs jinx while someone else petrified him. We needed a mop to get the poor sod to St. Mungo's to have the mess reversed. What spells connected, and how? Maybe we can reconstruct the events."

"My expelliarmus connected head-on with his killing curse," Harry replied.

"Ooookay. In that case, I believe we'll forego a simulation," Tonks chuckled, "but enough of this. I'm starving, and the elves are just waiting for a chance to stuff us to the gills!" she started and turned to leave for the kitchen, but stopped when Hermione started talking.

"Sorry, but that doesn't add up," she said, her forehead wrinkled in concentration. "If Tonks was right, your wand was already broken back then, so there wouldn't be any core left to interact."

"You're right," Harry blurted out as something else hit him. "And remember the Quidditch World Cup? Crouch stole my wand and could cast the mark with it. And his dad could cast *priori incantatem* on it. It still worked back then, so your theory got just shot out of the water, Tonks," he concluded with a smirk at his minder.

"Bite me, luv!" Tonks huffed at him. "Then you probably burnt it out during the wand lockup thing you told us about," she told him with a sneer, turning again to leave, but Harry held her back once more.

"But when the Dementors attacked me and Dudley last summer, the ministry was still able to track me casting the Patronus spell, so it must still have been okay back then," he told her. A second later, his face lit up in a huge smile. "Come to think of it, I did my first wandless magic back then – I lit my wand with a *lumos* while I was searching for it!" he told them, and Hermione used the opportunity to hug Harry. Any opportunity to do so must be used, she thought.

"Arrgh!" Tonks yelled, stomping her foot as her hair colour started cycling wildly. "Can't you nitpickers leave well enough alone? Fine! How about this: When Harry defended the Dementor swarm, he nearly burnt his wand out, but it still worked a bit. He had to start compensating with wandless magic to keep up in class, but it worked well enough for Crouch to use it and leave an echo. There was still an core left, so it interacted with Voldemort's wand. Then, when you used it to chase off the two Dementors in Surrey, you burnt out the rest, or maybe you did that during the Battle of the Ministry!" she yelled at the group, advancing at them while waving her finger at them repeatedly, which made them instinctively yield ground and back into the wall as the irate witch ranted at them.

"Satisfied? Or shall I go to Ollivander and ask him for forensic research into when the wand got broken? It's ruined; you can cast wandless, and everybody is happy - now let me get dinner!" she yelled at the group, which was shrinking into the wall as she towered over them, her hair morphed into a writhing mass of snakes. With an angry screech of frustration, Tonks abruptly turned around and stomped off into the kitchen, where two scared yells and the sound of breaking cutlery sounded, followed by Tonks screeching again.

The kids and Margret turned at each other and gulped in unison. That woman could be scary when she wanted to.

During the lunch feast that Dobby and Winky had created, Tonks slowly calmed down and the talk continued for a bit about what everyone had bought and how the day was spent, before the teens made their escape.

While Harry went to put away his new stuff, Hermione left for the library. Margret, of course, followed.

"Hi there; would it bother you if I join you for a chat?" She asked after closing the door behind her, and noticed Hermione tensing like a rabbit at the sight of a snake.

Chuckling, she addressed the frightened teen. "Come on, I've told you that I do agree with you being a couple and I trust both of you to be responsible, whatever you decide to do, all right? I am quite sure he did something to you, didn't he?"

"You know that it is slightly awkward talking about this with you?" Hermione asked, leaving the shelf she had been perusing and sat on the couch, her mother joining her.

"Hey, we always talked about the potential happenings and mechanics of a relationship; why can't I ask about a real one?" her mother joked.

"Well, it is a bit more... well, real now, not so theoretical."

Margret snorted. "As was my love life when you asked questions about it. So come on, what did he do?" She asked, bouncing on the sofa.

"You know, you sound like a gossip girl at school when you do that," Hermione laughed, before finally delving into gossiping, herself.

"I never knew that he would catch on that fast. He surprised me. There I was, just teasing him about stuff, and suddenly, he was giving me orders. Let's just say he is a natural at commanding. For some reason he just knows how to give orders the way it makes me tingle inside. He's got this presence now, an almost dominating aura ever since the wards collapsed. He was intense before, but now, now it's nearly overwhelming." She finished speaking, not realizing the breathy tone she had used towards the end.

"Don't make me jealous, Hermione, he's waaay to young for me," Margret laughed, before getting serious. "What orders? Did he push you?"

Hermione blushed and decided that honesty was the better side of valor, lest her mother assume foul play.

"Oh no, he didn't. Although I hinted that I would have played along, he just tried to embarrass me, tease me. I gave him a novel to read, and suddenly he was asking me about masturbation, and when I got cheeky in my embarrassment, he sent me to my room to increase the counter, if you understand. And he had Dobby make the walls between our rooms transparent to sound!" she told her mum, her blush giving away that she probably had given Harry quite a show.

At this point, Margret chuckled, wearing a big smile. "Very inventive, I certainly have to talk to Henry about such stuff. With magic, we might learn a few new tricks. And what about the shopping trip? I know you're not usually such a diva."

"You wouldn't believe me; I teased him about a lengthy trip, and he just told me that in case of any session lasting longer than one hour, I was to increase the counter in a changing booth. There was no way that I'd do that, yet," she cheekily added, "but I didn't want to chicken out and let him win," Hermione whispered, which made Margret guffaw.

"He's a keeper, be sure of that, Hermione. Any other guy would have tried to have you on your knees before him by now, yet he's just teasing you. And such a devious mind; are you happy?"

Hermione's smile was answer enough, and soon both women were engrossed in a vivisectional discussion of their current love lives.

*** High Barnet, July 2nd, early evening. ***

Dumbledore rang the doorbell a second time, with still no response.

The cars were sitting under that nice pergola that they obviously used as a garage, so he assumed the Grangers were at home. He was aware that they shouldn't be on vacation just yet. He took care to know everything about his students, especially those connected to Mr. Potter.

Still, no one was answering the doorbell. Finally, he drew his wand and unlocked the door. Quietly searching the house, he found three things of importance. First, the kitchen resembled a potions lab; second, no one was home; and third, the wardrobes were empty, and the empty spaces on shelves, walls and furniture made him assume that framed photographs and many books had been removed.

They had bailed.

He let loose of a frustrated sigh. He had been busy the last two days. First, there had been an attempt to assassinate Director Bones, which failed since the Death Eaters weren't able to overpower the wards quickly enough and had been forced to retreat when Auror help arrived. Director Bones was injured and had to resign from her post, and Rufus Scrimgeour, an Auror, was named her successor.

A muggle bridge in London had also been destroyed, and only the fact that the Death Eaters were repelled at the Bones residence and vast amounts of gold helped Fudge to stay in office, if only by a hair's breadth. But to get this gold, Fudge had most of the incarcerated Death Eaters from the Ministry raid pardoned with flimsy stories explaining their actions away. Once again, he asked himself why he had allowed that man to get in office.

And then he had his special mission to fulfil. A sad look at his withered right hand reminded him of the price. Since Severus was forced to treat the now withering Lord Voldemort, he already had a bunch of complicated potions at hand. By that lucky coincidence alone, Severus was able to stop the decay. His hand would never be the same, nor would his health, but there was no point in bemoaning a spilled cauldron.

Because of all those problems, he had relied on the other Order members to conduct the search properly. 'But I forgot that most of them would not be able to find their own heads without a summoning charm', he chided himself.

Apart from Moody, most of the Order members were only useful as sources of intel. Moody - while no help with any search because he spent most of his time inventing pass phrases, dead letter drops, and looking for potential traps - was fine to have in a fight, at least.

When Albus had asked them casually if they had asked the Grangers about Harry, they told him that they didn't because Ron had told them that if Harry were to contact anyone, it would be him. And of course they believed that little prick and his illusions of grandeur, as Severus stated.

The Weasleys, annoying as they were, were his most devoted followers. Apart from the twins and maybe Ginevra, the girl, they were firmly under his control.

'It's astonishing how many favours you can accumulate with a bit of help here and a kind word there,' he chuckled.

Still, they were not the sharpest tools in his shed, but normally they sufficed. Usually, but not this time. With another, disappointed sigh and a soft crack, he disappeared from the home as if he had never been there.

*** Hogwarts Castle, July 3rd, early morning ***

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, " Albus Brian Percival Wulfric Dumbledore intoned, trying to bring a semblance of order to the current attendance.

Of course, Molly and his teachers were present, as were Remus and Alastor, and the two youngest Weasleys, since Molly wouldn't leave them alone without supervision. Of course, she had first inquired if there were any things about the war to be discussed, for her children needed to be spared such knowledge. Sometimes, that woman made him want to scream. A part of him felt sad at the thought that Ms. Vance wouldn't ever join them again. She had been a victim of a Death Eater attack the same day as Madam Bones.

"I have called you to this meeting as I have finally have found a hint to Mr. Potter's whereabouts."

As usual after mentioning Harry, he paused in his speech to let Severus voice his contempt and for the others to chide Severus. Of course, he could have reined him in, but it was better to have someone controversial in any organisation to create factions. If the members unified behind a cause, they might start questioning their leader.

"Now, now", he chided as the ruckus calmed down again. "Please, we need to stand united to face the evils that lie ahead. But back on topic, I have a rather strong suspicion that Mr Potter is currently hiding somewhere with the Granger family." As he finished, he concentrated on his legilimency, trying to assess the people in the room. Surprise was there, as was happiness, probably because Voldemort had not captured Harry. It always fascinated Dumbledore that despite being a very accomplished occlumens, Snape's anger at hearing the word 'Potter' seeped even through the man's normally iron defences.

For a split second, he felt a hint of fear and panic from someone in the room, and then an outburst from Ronald revealed the culprit. "He wouldn't! If he were to have contacted someone, it would have been me. He never would have gone to Hermione instead," he shouted, and Dumbledore felt a strange mixture of fear and jealousy from the teen. He didn't want to think about on whom that feeling was focused. Some things, he just didn't want to know - for now, at least. But considering the fight after the ball two years ago, he assumed that Mr. Weasley thought he had laid claim to Miss Granger.

"So it is paramount that we try to apprehend the Grangers, for wherever they are, Harry should not be far. If they are reluctant to cooperate, a small compulsion charm should suffice. Since they were to leave for a holiday later, I think we should focus on Heathrow Airport, while still watching Diagon Alley, in case Harry or the Grangers show up there."

With that, Albus had addressed his most pressing matter, and after a bit of chatting, the group broke up to start their individual days. In one instance, a person even started a new life. Remus had finally had enough. The nerve! Using compulsion charms on the Grangers to make them rat out Harry? That was the last nail in the coffin. He now was completely Harry's man.

AN:

Pfeil entered the lair to deliver his corrections to the Dark Lord Cluffy's latest plans. He found DerLaCroix sitting on a table, talking animatedly to embirsiphonelilathia about what to do with the next Chapter. As Pfeil drew closer, he noticed that the girl was spasming every now and then.

He gave his newest parchment to the Lord, who instantly started to look over it, and waited patiently for the next task. DerLaCroix leaned over, and casually started asking some questions about a part of the text, while Pfeil grew more and more concerned about the health of his co-beta.

Finally, he couldn't wait any longer and asked what the matter was.

"Oh, that's her new training collar," answered his Lord. "Every time she lusts after Snape, she gets an electric shock," he explained, turning a page.

Brrrrzzzzelll "Yikes!"

Pfeil jumped as embirsiphonelilathia was thrown out of her chair by a shock that knocked her out and left her lying on the floor and smoking slightly.

"What the hell was that?" He yelled.

"Oh, that," DerLaCroix replied absentmindedly, "that happens every time she dares lust after Draco..."

The book exists, but I never read more than a few lines from various pages as I was laughing my ass off at the words while I browsed through it at the supermarket line. It was a book by Samara Fraser, and I changed/translated the title. I knew that there were some rather extreme scene in there, and I just invented my own content. I think I will buy it now, just to see if the scene I invented for a later chapter is tamer or more extreme than her scenes. But given the reviews at Amazon, I think I'm much tamer.

I think it's only fair to give her credit, since the short look into her book inspired me to write 'Rocking the boat'. (Along with a scene that happens in the original Book 6)

I'm going with Charlus Potter as Harry's grandfather. It was said that James Potter was a late child, but if you take that Charlus was born in 1920, and had only one son, this son would be finished with Hogwarts around 1954 at the earliest. James Potter was the last Potter before Harry, and born 1960, so it must be him. So Harry is in fact a cousin to Sirius, and an uncle to Tonks and Draco.

Singled out minions:

jabarber69: And how should he have known that he doesn't need it anymore? He didn't even know that he did it!

Darkheart81/Blah/jd/ Keronshara: Did you really think I'd miss something obvious like that? Or my trusted betas? *surreptitiously cranks the voltage on embi's collar up a few notches*

To be honest, I missed the World Cup incident, but it was easy to add it into the plot. Thanks for the review; it would have been embarrassing if I actually had posted this chapter with that minor hole still in it.

You're welcome, oldgreyone. I'm glad we are on good terms again.

mwinter1: Yeah, he has a secret stash of blood hidden away, just in case the device that has worked fine for 15 years or so suddenly fails while Harry's running away. Standard procedure, isn't it?

deacondon: She throws a fit if someone calls her by her given name. How much more of a drama queen can you be?

Agouraki: Wow. Thanks. That's about the highest praise I can imagine.

Chapter 8: As time goes by

Grimmauld place, July 3rd, afternoon

"You want to do what?" Hermione yelled, glaring at Harry furiously.

Harry winced; he should have known she wouldn't agree to that.

"Oh, calm down, Hermione," Tonks said. "He just doesn't want to get any training until you can participate. I think it's cute."

When Tonks had come to Black Mansion after lunch, she had taken Harry aside for a short conversation in the library, asking if she should train him to fight. He had politely denied that, citing a desire to avoid slighting Hermione. Just when Tonks had asked a last time if he really didn't want to train and Harry had confirmed, Hermione came in and immediately started ranting at Harry.

Tonk's explanation baffled the younger witch, but didn't get her off her crusade.

"Why wouldn't you want to learn something because of me? That's plain stupid!"

"You tell him, sister!" Tonks quipped.

"Gee, damned if I do, damned if I don't!" Harry sighed. "Come on, Hermione, we both know how much you love learning. I know that you are practically devouring those books in the library, since I went over a few of them with you, but I know that it would break your heart if I were to get practical training while you weren't, since you can't do wandless magic. I just didn't want to have this come between us."

Hermione was surprised by the insight her boyfriend possessed. She was stunned into silence, which was quickly broken by Tonks.

"I still think the gesture is cute, but it is unnecessary. Remember, this house is under a Fidelius charm."

"And?" Harry asked, not able to connect the dots, while Hermione started beaming.

"First, the underage warnings only work if in the minor's house and environs. The Ministry has a surveillance device set to the addresses of Hogwarts students. The rest is assumption. And second, how do you think that would work with a location whose whole existence is hidden?" the pink-haired Auror quipped.

"Oh, so the Fidelius charm means that we can't be noticed, at all?" Harry finally got it. "But why didn't you tell us when we were cleaning this house last year? It would have been so much easier if we could have used magic!"

Tonks's hearty laughter rang through the library. "With Molly around? Dream on, loverboy!"

After that - while important - revelation, Hermione had some even more important things to discuss. She took Harry's hand and shot Tonks a glance known to every woman. The Auror rapidly vacated the room, citing it had become TMI territory.

"Why did you think I would be upset?" asked Hermione, once they were alone and had taken seats on 'their' couch in the library.

"You mean, how did I know you would be upset?" Harry snorted. "I've been trained for years to sense moods and possible things to upset people. The Dursleys used to punish me for a lot of things: unfinished tasks, talking, being around, having good marks, everything. I had to anticipate what would be the best things to do all the time, lest I got in trouble."

"Good marks?" Hermione said, horrified. For her, that was the worst thing that could happen.

"Oh yes. When I got home once with an A mark on an exam Dudley had failed, I got the worst beating I ever received. I started having bad marks on purpose. It took me until fourth year to realize that they don't care about my Hogwarts results."

"Well, that explains something. I always wondered why you seemed like a mediocre student, yet turned out to be so good when our OWLs approached. You ran the DA incredibly; you had such knowledge of magic that I only had to give you a spell and you could teach it a few minutes later."

"Well, I just stopped hiding. Time was much too short and valuable to waste it."

"And now you would have wasted it because of me?" she asked, giving him a look that clearly showed her questioning his common sense.

"I didn't want you to feel bad because of it. I could still have read up on spells and stuff."

"Don't be stupid!" Hermione huffed, her voice firm and reprimanding. "You will start training with Tonks, and so will I. Even if I couldn't, you still should have taken her offer."

She then smiled at him and gave him a peck on his cheek. "But I appreciate the gesture."

When that was settled, they rose and went to find Tonks. But before they made it out of the library, Harry stopped her, turned her around, pinning her to the door.

"You know, I think there is some punishment due for yelling at me. I believe this calls for corporal punishment." He said, leering at her.

Hermione gulped and felt her face getting hot. Since that talk to her mother, she had actually feared that one day he would try to push her, like most boys would. Would she be able to say no if he tried?

Harry smiled at her, and caressed her cheek. With a sweet whisper, he gave his order.

"For you yelling at me for my own good, I demand that I may kiss you."

Now that was a punishment a very relieved Hermione readily agreed to.

The next day, Henry found Margret standing near the partly open door to the Library with a dreamy smile on her face. Noticing her husband closing in, she raised her finger to her lips in the well-known gesture demanding silence and then waved him over.

As he drew up alongside her, she silently pointed through the door, snuggling into his side.

Through the door, he saw a cute couple, his daughter and her boyfriend, sitting together on a couch reading. The way they cuddled together was nice enough, but in addition, every time Hermione turned a page, she leaned over and gave Harry a peck on the cheek.

While Margret obviously found that cute, Henry frowned slightly at the sight. Ever since he became aware that Harry wouldn't smite him on the spot if he said a wrong word about their relationship, Henry's protective father routine had dared to raise its ugly head again.

Sighing and shaking her head, Margret dragged her husband away with her, eager to get to breakfast and maybe a bit of couple-time afterwards - that is if Henry played his cards well and behaved.

The next few days brought some relief to the wizarding world. Because their Dark Lord was pressing his men to find Potter at all cost and made no new attack plans, the regular attacks ceased nearly overnight, and the whole wizarding world let out a collective breath at the short recess.

The first days went by normally, or as what had become the norm. Harry and Hermione would be found in the library, studying spells, each to their own favourite topic. This meant that Harry preferred things he deemed useful, like direct approach fighting magic, while Hermione was looking for everything, the more obscure the better. Whenever Tonks was around, she ran some drills for the kids, mostly basic stuff like fast casting, dodging, and quick drawing for now.

Although the Harry's wand was nothing more than a piece of wood, they chose to continue using it, for two reasons. Primarily, they wanted to keep his wandless skill under cover – being able to still cast after he got disarmed was the perfect surprise. He even could spring an attack on somebody that way.

The second reason was more mundane. Harry couldn't hit shit without pointing a stick at it.

On the romantic front, all things went rather well. They would exchange kisses every now and then, and while their kisses had

sometimes led to full snogging, they were actually rather restrained, given that they were alone in the house for most of the day and the modus operandi in their relationship.

But Harry proved to be himself, incorruptible even by all his power given over a certain witch, and stayed a gentleman, although his reading material made him question if that was expected. He did what he could to keep Hermione on her toes with occasional orders - the burden of authority, you know.

One day at breakfast, Harry had an idea. "Hermione, would you like to go for a walk at Diagon Alley?" he asked over the table, ignoring Crookshanks, who was trying to hypnotize Harry to hand over the rest of the bacon and sausage. Hedwig was still nipping on her piece of sausage up on the curtain rail, but the little tiger that Hermione had mistaken for a cat had scoffed off his piece faster than Harry could blink.

Hermione finished her bite of scone before answering. "Do you think we should? You know that the Order is probably watching the Alley."

"Probably, but I am fed up with being holed up in here. I think if we have Remus or Tonks with us and use some sort of disguise, we will be fine."

"Come on, we haven't had a real date yet, I know you are as anxious to get out as I am." When Hermione still seemed reluctant, he joked, "Don't make me order you." This made Hermione laugh and relent, since he was right; she didn't fancy spending all her summer in this dark house either.

When Remus showed up around noon, having spent the last three days at home for his transformation, he agreed to take them for a short trip to Diagon Alley. This was possible since today Remus was on Order duty to watch the place, which was practically making sure that no other Order members would be there, as it was the least wanted watch post available. No one liked to watch over a busy street to find a teen. So, being the only unemployed Order member meant that this post was usually his during the day. This meant that although with a chaperone and some glamour charms applied, they finally had a chance to have a real date.

"So, where do you two want to go next?" Remus asked after the customary lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. He knew that Harry had gone to his stack of gold they had placed in the Master Study's safe, which was hidden behind a couch under a display of nautical knots along with some ledgers about the Potter and Black accounts.

After Remus had worked his way through those, it was revealed that the Potters and Blacks had a nice portfolio of investment in various companies: In case of the Potters, even some muggle companies, earning him a nice steady income, while he would be hard pressed to even spend the interest on what the Blacks had accumulated.

The Black money was mainly invested in property; he now owned about one third of Hogsmeade, a good quarter of Diagon Alley and nearly all of Knockturn Alley, with a bit of stock strewn in. All this was good and well, but as things stood, he would only be able to access these and the Potter holdings when he was of age. Until then, the Goblins would manage those, leaving him only access to his vault and the personal vault of Sirius.

They had managed, between Harry's vault and the Padfoot's ready cash, to get about fifty-three thousand Galleons stacked away in the safe, so they had unhindered access. There, Harry had made a hefty 'withdrawal' this morning, planning to spoil Hermione at every chance he would get.

Of course, they spent some time browsing Flourish & Blott's, but since Hermione had the whole Black Library to browse, she was reluctant to buy anything. So Harry treated her to a new robe at Madam Malkin's, which was highly appreciated. They were playing with the thought of stopping at Ollivander's, to replace Harry's wand.

That would have made Harry's spells more powerful, since wandless casting caused a lot of magic go to waste in focusing the spell, but they knew that the old Ollivander was a friend of Dumbledore and would probably rat them out, so they left it be. After some more browsing and walking, with Remus in line of sight, and subtly watching them, as to not arouse suspicion and giving them some privacy, they decided to have an ice cream, since no visit to the Alley was complete without Fortescue's legendary creations.

While they sat and shared an 'A bit of every flavour' cup, occasionally feeding each other and having a blast of a time, two

owls approached them, landing across the table on an unused chair. Harry felt a bit suspicious about the timing and wanted to warn Hermione, but it was already too late.

Noticing the envelopes, Hermione had squealed, "It's our OWL results, Harry!", and collected the envelopes. Just as she ripped hers open, a crack was heard, followed by a well-known voice. "Finite!"

The next thing he felt was the icy shiver indicating their glamours failing, and then the voice spoke again.

"Nice to finally meet you again, Mister Potter, Miss Granger; you both prove to be very elusive."

Turning around and glaring at the man, none of them noticed the blonde boy in the back of the store slamming some coins onto the table and leaving in a hurry.

"How nice of you to make my presence here known to everyone, Headmaster - I would have thought that you, of all people would have noticed the benefits of me going out under cover in times like these," Harry snapped at Dumbledore, who just had cancelled their disillusionment charms. Obviously, the old man had placed tracking charms on the letters and had followed the owls. Meanwhile, Hermione had packed the letters away in her bag, and produced some coins to settle their bill. They had no wish to stay here any longer, now that they were uncovered.

"My dear boy," Dumbledore chuckled, "you know that you should not be out of your home at all, and that is exactly where we will be heading right now."

"Of course we will, Headmaster. After your stupid stunt it's much to dangerous for us to be out here," Harry snarled as he helped Hermione out of her seat.

"Very good decision, Harry. I am sure, the Dursley's will be glad to have you back under their roof," Dumbledore said, slightly irritated that the boy had folded so quickly.

"I doubt that they will. Why would I even contemplate going there? I, for one, would rather do the tango with a Dementor than go back there," Harry huffed, while Hermione chuckled at the mental picture.

Dumbledore was a bit peeved about the boy's behaviour, but even more confused about it. "This is nothing to joke about, Harry; and stop this nonsense - you just said you would return to the Dursleys."

"Did I? Strange, I do not remember that. Hermione? Did we plan to visit the Dursleys?"

"Well we could if you want to," Hermione ruminated, quickly getting his intention and glad to join in. "But I had planned to do this next year on your birthday so we both can hex those bastards into the next century together."

"Oh, really? You do give the best presents, you know? I'll be yearning for that birthday all year long. Thank you!" Harry cheered, and gave Hermione a kiss on her cheek, before he smirked deviously at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore did not share his anticipation.

"Please do not make this difficult. You know that there is no alternative. You've had your adventure, but now you have to go back to your family."

"And how do you want to force me to? Since you aren't an Auror, I don't think you have any right to detain me. Nor any legal cause. And you can be sure of one thing: I'll not go quietly!" Harry promised, and put his hand on the wand sticking out of his sleeve.

"Harry, please. You should know that Voldemort is currently concentrating all his efforts on finding you, and only the wards at home will keep you safe. It is paramount that we return there immediately, so these wards can be charged. You have already been away for too long."

"You keep ignoring the point, Headmaster," Hermione threw in, "that Harry doesn't want to get back there, because he knew nothing than abuse at that place. Certainly you wouldn't want to place Harry in an abusive home, again, don't you?" Her voice had started to rise, causing more people to watch the argument.

Dumbledore was less than pleased with the way that talk was going. It would not do to antagonize the boy any more. Maybe the grandfatherly approach would help.

"I agree that the accommodation was less than adequate, Miss Granger, but I assure you that I will take care that there will be no further complaints."

"Unacceptable." Harry stated. "I will not live under that roof again. I will swear an oath to that, if need be."

That was enough to have the old man scrambling for an alternative. It would not do to have Harry lose his magic. Too much depended on him.

"That would be most unwise," the old man relented, "But if you insist, I might be able to arrange a stay for you at the Burrow, with Order protection."

Harry wasn't able to inform Dumbledore where to shove that proposition, because they were interrupted by a staggered series of pops, followed by screams of panic. Five Death Eaters had apparated into the Alley.

"Great! Thank you for getting us killed, you old fool!" Harry yelled and started dragging Hermione away from the tables, and they started running toward the Alley's exit, while all around people started disapparating and running. Unfortunately, Remus, who had kept some distance to avoid being spotted by Dumbledore in case he had to intervene, was now blocked by the crowd as he tried to keep up with his charges.

With Dumbledore in hot pursuit, they made it to Flourish & Blott's before they ran into their other enemies. A group of three Death Eaters were walking down the Alley, blocking their path to the Floo to safety.

"Aaaaaw! Isn't that wittle Potty over there? And Dumbledore, you old fossil - still breathing?" a high-pitched, annoying voice sounded. Bellatrix Lestrange, mask-less and crazy as ever, was leading the group.

Meanwhile, the other Death Eaters were fanning out behind them. To Harry's relief, it seemed as if most of them were focussed on Dumbledore.

Harry reacted by drawing his wand and moving slightly in front of Hermione. Hermione had her own wand drawn, too, but didn't really look all that confident.

"No gloves," Harry hissed at her, while monitoring his enemies. Hermione jerked when she heard him say that, but knew he was right.

"Oh, you've brought your mudblood friend with you," the rightmost man snarled, taking one step forward. "Finally I can complete what I started at our last meeting," he laughed, identifying himself as Dolohov.

Harry immediately moved to completely shield Hermione from that man, levelling his wand at his new primary target.

"Oh, how chivalrous. All right, Potter, I give you the first spell, better make it a good one," Dolohov mocked him, while the other Death Eaters just joined him in laughter.

"Come on, Potter, I don't have all day!" Dolohov taunted, and as an afterthought, added, "Although I think will take my time with your mudblood after we captured you. She has grown up nicely, hasn't she, fellas?"

While the other Death Eaters laughed at that, Harry felt himself going cold with rage. No way was he going to let any of them get their hands on Hermione. Scowling, he slashed his wand towards Dolohov, shouting "Diffindo!"

Dolohov chuckled and raised a protego shield as soon as he saw Harry starting to move. He knew the whelp would attack immediately after his latest taunt, and like expected, it was something a simple protego could manage easily. His smile lasted until the "o" of the incantation, when instead of a thin red wedge of cutting energy, a 3 feet long, sizzling, scythe-like blade of angry crimson magic ploughed towards his neck.

Realizing that his shield would fail like paper against that, he tried to dodge to the right, but given the distance, he had no chance to dive fast enough. His thoughts about how that could be possible were cut short, along with his cranium and a good part of his brain, when the curse smashed through his shield and impacted half an inch above his left eye, slicing clean through. His body completed the movement, landing with a soft thud, while the lopped off part of his skull eerily clattered down the street.

All action ceased for a comical moment, while everybody watched the skipping piece of bone.

Bellatrix recovered first, screaming her rage and launching spell after spell at Dumbledore, trying to take the master Mage by surprise, and instantly driving him back a couple of yards towards the Alley. Four others quickly moved to join her.

Dumbledore held his own, countering, transfiguring and casting like a flash, but against five, he had to constantly give ground to stay on top of them.

While one of the two stooges left with them was still staring, the other recovered quicker than Harry, casting a Crucio at him. For a split second, Harry wanted to dodge to his left, but then remembered that he was still shielding Hermione with his body. Knowing that the still distracted Hermione stood right behind him, Harry gritted his teeth and remained still, awaiting the twisting red light to impact.

Instantly, he felt the fiery knives carving his flesh in a seemingly never-ending symphony of pure agony. It was not as bad as Voldemort's spell had been, but there is no such thing as a 'light' Crucio. For a second, he remained in control of his body, before his conscience was drowned in a sea of pain.

With Harry falling to the ground, screaming, Hermione snapped to attention. She immediately identified the caster and swished her wand at him, yelling an incantation furiously, knocking the caster into a book display with a fierce pellico bludgeoner into the face, breaking at the very least, his nose.

While Harry was still panting, the last thug took a panicked look around, and seemed to remember that while his master wanted Potter taken alive, no such restriction applied to the girl. He whipped

out his wand and yelled a feared incantation, letting a bolt of sickly green energy lance out at her, exposing a silver hand. Harry wanted to yell, jump, whatever; do something to get her out of the way, but his body didn't respond as he wanted to, and he was only able to crawl to his knees and look on helplessly.

Hermione yelped and dropped to the ground, dodging the poorly aimed spell, but while evading successfully, she landed badly and unluckily banged her head, nearly knocking herself out. The spell slammed into a wall, showering the Alley and the three combatants with brick debris and dust, while the world spun before her eyes.

Harry had already seen Hermione die before his inner eye, and couldn't believe her and his luck. For a brief moment, he was grinning in joy. But then he noticed that Hermione was currently completely defenceless against any follow-up, whipped his wand at Pettigrew, yelling "incendio".

Although some Defence Authors considered that spell useful in a battle, it is usually a bad idea to use it. Granted, it produces a jet of flame hot enough to light a few logs of wood immediately, and nearly everyone can cast it, but it lacks range and can be blocked with a simple protego.

But the biggest disadvantage is that, although it makes a reasonable flamethrower, most people can't hold that spell very long, and the shield uses much less magic than the flame.

Still, there is one thing at which it excels in a fight: to pin someone down.

Harry knew that he was not able to cast a properly aimed spell in his state. Back in the resurrection battle at the graveyard, he had learned that you can't aim properly after being exposed to the Cruciatus. He didn't hit Voldemort and his spells were so far off that nor did he score any hits on the Death Eaters surrounding them. But the constant stream of fire meant he could continually correct his aim, so as long as he held it, Pettigrew would be unable to cast at Hermione. And as soon as she could clear her head, his girlfriend could relieve him and drop Peter.

Pettigrew had barely managed to raise a shield in time and, just like Harry had planned, was now pinned down against a wall. He

couldn't cast or apparate while the shield was up, but without, he would be burnt severely. He toyed with the thought of transformation for a second, but came to the conclusion that it was strictly out, lest he end up very crispy.

At first, Peter wasn't really afraid, since he knew that all he needed do was to hold the shield and wait for Harry to collapse, which should be soon, and then he could take the exhausted boy to his master. At least he thought so. Twenty seconds later, the first drops of sweat began to form on his forehead. Five more seconds later, his wand arm began to shake, and another ten seconds later his knees buckled. At this point, he still wasn't afraid. He was far beyond scared.

Harry, at the other hand, was still levelling his wand without problems. Ok, his aim was swaying left, right and everywhere, but that didn't really matter, since at that distance, his cone of flame was at least 3 feet wide, and thus still aimed at his target. While still casting, he had managed to get onto his knees, and was slowly dragging himself towards a still dizzy Hermione, forcing his muscles to work despite the pain.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see that Remus had entered the fray, relieving Dumbledore. They still were at least 50 feet away, so no help would come from them, especially since Bellatrix proved as vicious as ever, shooting nasty looking spells left, right and centre. And still, there were no Aurors in sight.

"I yield, please, I yield!" Wormtail sobbed. He was covered in blisters, his cloak had started smouldering in some places and he had collapsed against the wall.

He had started begging a few seconds ago, and was holding his wands with two hands, giving all he had to keep the shield up. The bricks behind Pettigrew already had cracked, and a wrought-iron lamp was glowing red-hot above the short man. The ambient temperature had risen so much that he was starting to get burnt despite of the shield. Harry just glared at him, one hand steadying Hermione, who leaned heavily on him as someone grabbed his shoulder.

"Harry, let him go!" Tonks pleaded, "We'll take over."

Harry shook his head at her, noticing Shacklebolt rushing past him to join the fight against Bellatrix's team. "He... tried to... kill Hermione." he panted, teeth clenched and spasming slightly, but not lowering the wand.

"Harry, you don't want to kill him; I guarantee we will take care of him," Tonks begged, but dared not interfere.

"He... tried... kill..."Harry repeated.

"Harry! Stop that! We need him! He could clear Sirius! Do you want Sirius to be forever remembered as a Death Eater and betrayer? Please!" she begged again.

For a second, it seemed as if he would not listen, but then Harry sighed and complied. Ending the spell and lowering his blackened and smoking wand, he pulled Hermione closer, burying his face in her hair. Tonks rushed to disarm and bind the severely burnt Pettigrew.

After a short kiss on Hermione's head, who was still slightly dazed and clinging to Harry's arm, he gave Tonks a sharp look. "I make you ...personally... responsible... for him... Do not mess... this up," he panted, forcing the words out despite the pain it caused him.

Tonks nodded, knowing that Harry meant every word of that. Not willing to find out what he would do in case of that hopefully remote event, she dropped to a crouch besides him and handed them a portkey, vanishing them from sight.

AN:

"No!" yelled embirsiphonelilathia, while pfeil took the chance to slip out unnoticed.

"But every Dark Lord marks his followers," DerLaCroix whined.

"What part of NO didn't you understand," was the angry reply, empowered by an angry stomp of a dainty foot.

"Alright! Be like that!" DerLaCroix huffed as he threw his hands in the air and stomped off, throwing the branding iron against a wall...

Singled out minions:

stealacandy: let me answer by the plume...

*** About half a year ago ***

Mister Ollivander left the weighting of the wands in a hurry, muttering under his breath. This Potter boy was criminally neglecting his fine work. Not only was the wand nicked and dirty, but when he took it, he nearly couldn't sense the core anymore. He was so surprised by the amount of damage that he even forgot to mention the wand materials, as he had done for the others. He had been more than nervous when he cast one of the easiest charms he could come up with to test it, and delighted that it seemed to still work. He hastily proclaimed it fine and hurried out. 'Imagine if that core were burnt out after this little use already! I'd never had heard the end of it from Gregorovich! They would have torn me apart in the European newspapers! That boy could have ruined me!' he thought angrily as he stomped out of the castle, vowing to never make a phoenix feather wand again in his life. Those weren't really covering cost, anyway...

Peruser: This would add more people to the group, a group that has to stay hidden. And why would Andromeda agree to do this and go into hiding with her husband? Dumbledore would start pestering her immediately to have Harry put back at PD#4 or at Hogwarts. So, why should Tonks put her mother and father into peril when she is suited, as well? Remus was clearly out of question, and Tonks was in the know and as an Auror, more than able to hold her own. Andromeda and her relation to Dumbledore is unknown, she might as well be one of the Dumble-shippers, you see, most people worship the old goat 50% of the time, some full time.

Mwinter1: A 'blood adoption' to change his blood to be different would mean exchanging the adopters DNA for one of his parents', thus half his DNA, thus also changing his looks, build, etc. You would create a new person. You need some pretty exotic substances to do such a thing, trust me. I don't even know how to conjure the ten foot pole I wouldn't touch this topic with (in this story ;-D).

And to clarify, the person to bind has to be in contact with the ward anchor when the blood is applied. No remote binding.

Family line nitpickers ;) : Once removed, twice removed, shmemoved. This cousin grades and removed things are terrible confusing (Is that an American thing?). We address such relations simpler: Harry and Andromeda are on the same tree level. Thusly, called cousins (some degree). Tonks is one branch lower, so she is his niece. (Of some degree, third or fourth, but who cares). This is the 'Eskimo' kinship pattern, prominently used throughout Europe, so I assumed the British use the same system.

.org/wikipedia/commons/f/ff/European_kinship_system_ (in German, but should be understandable, the terms are not far off.)

A classical case of you say potato, I say potato. And just if you haven't noticed, they did something called teasing. ;)

Darriyon: you know that I'm already married, don't you?

MercedezPotter14: There are so many life debts both ways between them that everybody lost count already. All they do is make them care for each other even more, like a nagging voice of conscience. And her parents don't mind, to varying degrees. *chuckles*

Chapter 9: When it rains, it pours

**** Grimmauld place, July 9th, early afternoon ****

Margret was roused by a crash from downstairs. Rushing to identify the cause, she encountered a sight that would come to haunt her over the coming nights. In the foyer, right past the door still open door, her daughter was lying over a prone Harry, crying

Fearing the worst, she screamed for Henry and rushed down to help.

Closing in, she could see that Hermione seemed all right, but that Harry certainly wasn't. He was curled up into a ball and shivering. Hermione had pulled his head into her lap and was stroking his hair while crying softly. Margret dropped to her knees beside them and hastily felt for his pulse, which she found hammering like a racehorse's pace at Ascot finals.

At that moment, Henry ran down the stairs, nearly falling in his haste, and stopped before them. Seeing his wife care for the boy, he turned to Hermione and asked what happened.

"We were attacked by Death Eaters after Dumbledore tricked us and revealed our true identities. Harry was hit by a torture curse, and then I got knocked out. He protected me until Tonks came and sent us home."

"How is he?" Henry asked his wife.

"His pulse is racing and his muscles are cramping. I think we should get him into his bed. I think another dose of muscle relaxant might help. Maybe some pain reliever, too."

With a nod, Henry knelt down and lifted the boy into his arms. He was shocked when instead of being limp, Harry proved to be stiff as a board. He could feel those muscles rippling under the boy's clothes, cramping continuously. He rushed up the stairs, and deposited Harry in his bed, while Hermione followed as quickly as she could, leaning heavily on her mother.

As soon as she entered the room, Margret told Henry that she would leave to search for their medical equipment. Hermione held her back.

"I'm so stupid, should have thought of it first," she stammered, then shouted, "Dobby!"

"Yes, Mistress Gran... EEP! Master Harry is being sick! Dobby will be helping! What is you needing?" Dobby had popped in, and started shouting at the sight of Harry, wringing his ears.

"Bring every healing potion you can find. There should be a lot in my parent's stored trunk. Bring my parent's medical stuff, too. Whatever looks medical, ok?" Hermione said, while she slowly lowered herself to a chair.

Her mother took a look at her, held one of Hermione's eyes open. She then shielded it against the light with her hand a few times, watching the pupil's dilation. "Might be a concussion," she noted towards her husband, who was currently trying to undress Harry, looking for further injuries.

"I banged my head while dodging a spell. Don't really know what happened afterwards. I got lucid sometime during the portkey ride. I feel slightly sick from that," Hermione spoke with a thick voice, and held her head. She was developing a splitting headache, too.

A few seconds later, Dobby popped in, and started resizing stuff. A cardboard box with the potions in various bottles - whatever was available at the time Hermione brewed them - their doctors' satchels, the medicine cabinet and much other stuff. Hermione stopped him when he resized her father's antique dentist's stool, which had stood in his office as a keepsake.

While her mother started rooting in her satchel, Hermione slowly stood and shuffled over to grab a milk bottle with a deep green fluid, and gulped down a large gulp of the Bludger hit restoring potion. She sighed as the headache lessened and her dizziness faded a bit, and handed her mother some potions for Harry.

Meanwhile, Henry had Harry in the bed, and Margret was checking him over again. She fumbled around and finally got a chance to give Harry an injection when Henry grabbed Harry's arm and held it down forcibly. It took a few minutes for them to relax Harry's muscles, and the teen uncurled; now lying flat, only a full body shiver left from what would have been horrendous cramps. Only now they were able to feed him some of the potions.

Usually, the effect of these potions was immediate, but this time, it was like they had poured water down his gullet. Nothing happened.

"Harry? How do feel?"

"Hurts... Bad... Everywhere." Harry moaned, to which the elder Grangers exchanged a look.

"Nerve damage," Henry said with a sad glance at his wife, then looking at Hermione. "There's nothing we can do against that, except strong painkillers to knock him out. But he might get addicted to them before he gets better, if ever. Got any potions for that?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, all I got are blunt trauma and burn damage. No pain potions. I don't know. Maybe... wait a minute... Dobby? Can you find Auror Tonks?"

The elf had not left yet, just retreated into the background, and jumped to attention. "Yes, Dobby cans, Master Harry's Grangy, Miss!"

"Could you please go to her, and ask her discreetly what to do against Cruciatus exposure? Ask her to talk to you alone; we don't want anybody to know. Maybe she has some potions or can tell you which to buy. Take these coins and buy all she tells you," she said, fetching and handing Dobby Harry's purse, which still contained about two hundred gallons from their earlier withdrawal.

After Dobby had popped away, Hermione unceremoniously crawled under the heavy blanket to cuddle Harry's side, and started cradling his head and caressing his hair, whispering encouragements into his ear.

If the situation weren't so serious, her parents would have ribbed her about that. But being as it was, Margret sat down at Harry's other side, patting his hand, while her husband stood behind her, his hand on her shoulder, giving silent support. Still, Harry did not respond to anything, and kept shivering and moaning in pain.

It must have been no more than 5 minutes later when a pop announced the elf's return. He carried a big box with the apothecary's logo on it.

"Dobby did as told, Dobby did buy everything Miss Tonksie said, as much as he could." he said, dropping the box on the nightstand, and vanishing the lid with a snap of his fingers.

"Miss Tonksie said that Master Harry Potter, Sir, must be taking one of the blue now and one of the purple when the potion works and Master Harry, Sir, is being awake again. Miss Tonksie said we can not do more than that for Master Harry, Sir, but Master Harry, Sir will be getting better by tomorrow evening," he said and paused to hand Margret the correct potion, which she immediately fed to Harry with help of Hermione.

"Miss Tonksie wills being visiting Master Harry Potter, Sir, tomorrow morning, Miss Tonksie did say. Dobby is being sorry not being able to do more for Master Harry. Dobby will beg Master Harry Potter, Sir, to let Dobby punish Dobby when Master Harry Potter, Sir, awakes," the elf whined, his hands flinching as his desires fought against his orders not to punish himself.

"That won't be necessary," Henry interrupted gently. "By the way, where is Winky?"

"Winky is not being called, so Winky is being working and waiting for Dobby to tell Winky about Master Harry. May Dobby go and calm Winky?"

"Oh, how stupid of us," Margret gasped. "Winky!" she called, causing the other elf to appear. Obviously, Winky was as distraught as Dobby; she arrived crying.

"Mistress Grangy-Mum called?" she said after sniffing the tears away.

Margret left Harry's side to kneel before Winky, hugging her. "Harry has been hurt, but now he will be getting better, thanks to Dobby's help. I just called you so that you needn't stay alone."

Being relieved that her master would be fine; Winky even forgot to be properly embarrassed, and let her be guided to the bedside, where Margret sat down again, while Winky and Dobby joined the vigil - of course only after they had popped out quickly to bring seats and refreshments for their caring masters.

True to Tonk's prediction, Harry got lucid about an hour later, got his second potion and promptly fell asleep again. None of the Grangers left their positions that night.

*** In a dark hideout ***

Screams were echoing through the halls of Voldemort's lair as the Dark Lord personally debriefed the capture team in person. While he knew that the mission had been initiated on the fly after the Malfoy boy had stumbled across the Potter brat and the old coot, failure still was no option. Only his weakened state kept him from killing them outright, but punishment had to be dished out.

After all, he had sent eight of his own against Dumbledore, Potter and his mudblood. And what happened? Dolohov dead, and two captured! Once more he channelled his anger into his Cruciatus curse as he debriefed the last man of the team before turning towards the leader kneeling next to the curled up man.

The dark lord stopped as he saw the nearly eager expression on the face of his only female lieutenant at the prospect of getting cursed. "No, Bella, I am not going to curse you," he said with a sickly sweet voice, watching her face fall. Right then, he realized to his great displeasure that she truly was beyond help. She had been crazy already when he met her, but after her stint to Azkaban she was only inches away from complete insanity. He had to make sure he never cursed her again if he didn't want to loose her.

"You deserve a special punishment, my dear," he whispered sweetly, causing all people present to wince in anticipation. "You will not torture, hurt or kill anyone for a month, not even watching, except if I send you on a mission. And even then, you will not cause any collateral damage beside your orders," he told her, watching the insanity briefly leave her face as she looked at him like a kicked puppy. "Also, you will go down to the chambers every morning, healing all present prisoners, and then take them the memories of their abuse before you bring them away and release them into the Muggle world unharmed," he told her, delighted in the horrified look she sported now.

"You all will make sure that there are always some prisoners present," he said with a look around at the other assembled and

watching Death Eaters, gaining a chorus of delighted positive responses.

"Now leave!" he barked, causing all of them to quickly move out.

"Oh, and Bella," he added while returning to his throne and sitting down slowly. "If you dare disappointing me once more or misbehave even the slightest during this punishment, I'll make you bed the male ones," he whispered, his crimson eyes staring into her dark ones, before they rolled up into her head as she fainted at the bare thought of doing so.

*** Grimmauld place, July 10th, 7:34 ***

"Damn it!" Tonks muttered again as she materialized in the deserted entrance area.

Adding one and one, she quickly made her way up to Harry's bedroom, where she encountered Harry and the Grangers, the elder ones sitting in chairs next to the bed and Hermione still under the sheets cuddling Harry. Before she could say a word, Hermione spotted her, and sat up, waving.

"Hello Tonks. What's wrong?" Hermione asked when she saw her frowning.

"The Order! Dumbledore found out," Tonks hissed, her hair turning deep purple. "He noticed me talking to Dobby last evening at the Ministry. We were both tied up in the questioning, but he has been trying to contact me all morning."

After some expletives of varying gravity were uttered around the room, Henry asked the million pound question.

"What does that mean for us?"

"They are looking for you, and given the connection between Dobby and Harry, they now know I am in contact with you. If they can add two and two, they will shortly know where you are hiding. Take a good look out of the window; I bet the Order is already waiting out there. Also, I will be hounded day and night by them to return you, if they do not try to get me arrested outright."

A quick look out of the window proved her guess. There were at least three members already waiting in front of the house.

"Hermione..." Harry croaked. The heated voices had woken him.

With a cry of "Harry," Hermione threw herself at him.

"Are you ok? You stupid... boy! Why didn't you just dodge that Cruciatus? You must have seen that even before me!" she sobbed.

"Would have hit you..." he croaked, before her hug silenced him.

Tonks snorted and elbowed Margret slightly to gain her attention. Bending over without taking her eyes from the teens, she whispered "When is the wedding, again?"

"As soon as I can arrange it," was the answer from Henry, who had overheard their talk. It seemed that by taking a literal bullet for Hermione, Harry finally gained his complete approval - at least for the moment.

After the teens had separated, Tonks got to business. "I need your version of the fight for the report."

After a quick look, Hermione began to describe the beginning, up to her fall and injury while dodging the curse.

Harry finished the tale and finally, Tonks gave her update about Pettigrew's fate, and that Scrimgeour, the new Head of MLE had already reopened Sirius's case.

"I wish I could have heard it. Witnesses claim that Fudge was cursing up a storm, but Scrimgeour, my new boss, wouldn't have any of that," Tonks told them with a broad smile. In fact, Scrimgeour was personally pushing the case - using the opportunity to weaken the Minister for his own political gains. There was no way he would miss out on a chance like that.

"You know, we managed to capture the one Hermione had downed and one of the others. When us Aurors showed up, the cowards retreated quickly, including my crazy aunt," Tonks continued her tale, ending in a frown.

"How deep in trouble is Harry this time?" Hermione asked, worrying her lip in concern. "Are there any charges against him?"

"Don't worry, girl, it was me and Kingsley who briefed Scrimgeour about the scene. He declared that the moment it became clear that Bellatrix was with them, any force was justified; he had signed the report instantly, clearing you from any misdemeanour," Tonks reported with a gleam in her eyes. "Admit it; sometimes it's nice to have a hardliner in charge, isn't it?"

All the time, Margret was rocking in her seat, itching to talk to Harry. "How do you cope with things, Harry? How do you feel about it?"

"I'm fine," Harry used his trademark line, but furrowing his brow. "That actually bothers me a bit. Shouldn't I be devastated or something? I don't feel anything, at all, over killing that man."

"Not necessarily," Henry interrupted to encourage his future son-in-law, patting his shoulder lightly. "After all you've been through, it can be expected that you're a bit jaded. But you won't see me crying, either. As long as you don't start to enjoy it, you're all right."

"Just one more thing, Harry," Tonks said. "While I can understand, it was stupid of you to shield Hermione."

Quelling the enraged responses with both hands raised, she moved on to explain. "While a Cruciatus is nasty business, she's a big girl and girls can take pain. With you disabled by the curse, on the other hand, both of your lives were endangered! You are the better fighter; you're fast, you don't hold back, and on full power, as proven, some of your curses even smash through their shields."

"The best course of action would have been to blast Pettigrew first, and then the man cursing Hermione. You see, as long as he's torturing her, he's not killing her, so he has practically taken himself out of the fight, increasing your chances," she ended her lecture, smiling at the people staring at her in shock.

"Remind me to never get on your bad side," Henry said after a low whistle, shaking his head.

While the now besieged were updating each other of the various topics, someone rang the doorbell.

"That would be Dumbledore," Tonks prophesied, and Henry made a face at her.

"Gee, I thought it would be Jehovah's witnesses," he drawled, rolling his eyes, demonstrating him being related to his daughter.

"Shall we ignore it or talk to him?" Harry asked while sitting up. Hermione did try to help him, hovering nicely, much to Margret's pleasure.

"Since he can't get in, as long as you don't invite him in, you could at least hear him out," Tonks ruminated.

"Ok, then I'll dress and we meet downstairs," Harry finished the conversation. Hermione lingered a bit, considering whether she should stay and assist Harry, but a look from her mother told her that now would be a bad moment for that. She decided to wait outside to help him down the stairs.

"Can't you do something? You are an Auror, and they are well overstepping their authority!" Henry huffed as they reached the entrance hall. "They practically forced us to stay hidden in this house and would have abducted Harry if you hadn't port-thingied them away."

"We are talking about Dumbledore. He is one of the most powerful - magically or politically - in Britain. He is head of our parliament and has enormous influence in the Ministry. He could easily get away with anything. And I believe he does have some legal title when child welfare is concerned, because of being Headmaster, and thus, Harry's magical guardian," Tonks explained as Harry went down the stairs. He went under own power, at a snail's pace and wobbling along on stiff legs, but Hermione only a thought away from helping him.

Henry gave Tonks a frown. "So he isn't actually breaking any laws, yet?"

"Nope, he has written most of these laws himself. He knows exactly what he can and can't do."

They were interrupted by a second, more insistent ring. Tonks hair flashed yellow as she jumped in shock. She suddenly stiffened as she remembered something. "Remus..." she whispered, before babbling at Harry.

"Remember Harry, whatever you do, do not invite anybody in, nor step out of the door or touch anyone. They are still locked out by the wards. Talk to them; stall them. I'll try and get Remus here. I fear we both will have to move in here," Tonks said in a rush, gave a quick goodbye and ran for the Floo, while Harry, with the Grangers in tow, went to answer the door.

When the heavy oak door was pulled open, Dumbledore's smiling face came into view.

"Ah, Harry, finally. We have come to escort you back to your family," he stated, as if stating the sky was blue.

"Strange, I don't remember calling a taxi," Harry countered, which made Henry snort. A quick glare from Margret quieted her husband. The rest of the order members, now nearly a dozen, were acting outraged, as they always did when someone dared to contradict their almighty leader.

"Harry, please. I know you are upset, but you have to return to your family."

"I am with my family!" Harry shouted. "Those evil assholes at Privet Drive never were and never will be my family - I am with my family, right now!" he said, demonstratively waving his left arm towards the Grangers, but failing to notice their proud smiles behind his back. His right hand was still on the doorknob, helping him to stand straight.

"Harry, you know that you need to go back. With Voldemort around, you are simply not safe here."

That statement made Harry laugh. "Sir, you are only able to talk to me because you know the secret. Voldemort doesn't. And if I am not safe here, why are you still out there?"

"I see," the old man sighed. "Maybe we should sit down and talk about that, Harry," he offered, and when Harry didn't react, he prompted "May I come in?"

"Do I look stupid, Headmaster?" Harry asked, "You are exactly where I do want you to be. I'll certainly not bring my enemies into my home."

A sharp collective gasp was heard from most of the Order members - only Snape chose to snarl instead. Molly Weasley, who of course was present, was the most vocal, and immediately started berating him.

"Harry Potter! Do not talk to the Headmaster like that. He is certainly not your enemy! What has gotten into you, young man?"

"Common sense!" Harry barked hotly in return, causing the Weasley matron to jump and puff herself up while sputtering incoherent sounds in her gurning outrage, and giving the overall appearance of a huge enraged chicken in a dress and apron.

"Oh, of course," Margret meanwhile snarled at the shocked looking Dumbledore from the background, "you are so obviously not our enemy. You led an assault team directly to Harry, uncovering his disguise in the middle of a crowded place. Were you born that stupid or did you work on that? With friends like you, Harry doesn't need enemies," she spat venomously at them.

"I assure you that this was all a big misunderstanding, Mrs. Granger," Dumbledore tried to calm the irate woman, knowing very well that her opinion would influence Harry. The Order members were just gaping at the muggle woman who dared to insult their leader like that.

"Of course, Headmaster," Harry sneered. "But now, since I still have some errands to do, I would like to wish you a good day. It was nice talking to you."

With that, Harry turned to close the door, but Dumbledore didn't want to leave it with that.

"Harry, I must insist that you come with me."

That was exactly the worst thing to say in that moment. Harry completely lost it. "Ever heard about a thing called 'CHOICE'? Who the fuck do you think you are, you meddling arse?" he yelled at the old man. It might have been his words, or the sparks flying from him, or the storm blowing around him, tugging at Dumbledore's robes, but the whole Order gasped and scrambled for cover. Not even Molly said one word, but tried to hide behind a lamppost.

"You have absolutely no right what-so-fucking-ever to demand anything from me. I have a written permission from the Dursleys to stay here with Tonks and Remus until my seventeenth birthday. So once again, I WILL NOT GO BACK!" Harry yelled, spittle flying from his mouth as he screamed out his anger at the man before him.

Dumbledore stood there, stoic, but the smile had left his face. He now emanated a small aura himself. The Grangers instinctively began to move back, slowly, as did the few Order members who had not found cover, yet. Only Hermione didn't; she moved a bit behind Harry, knowing that there was no safer place in the confrontation everyone thought inevitable.

"Mr. Potter", Dumbledore began, after taking a deep calming breath. "Let me inform you that that permission is irrelevant. Your relatives have changed their minds and have agreed to forget your behaviour and let you return home. Also, your actions yesterday and your current outburst make it plain that you are certainly not fit to live without supervision and guidance by competent adults. Since you insist on not returning to Privet Drive, you will accompany me to Hogwarts, where you will be under my supervision and tutelage 'til the beginning of your next school year, to show you the error of the way you have chosen. I'll not stand aside and watch you turn dark, like Riddle before."

Everybody, sans Dumbledore, cringed, as they expected Harry to let loose. But to their surprise, Harry relaxed. Thinking that he might have the kid browbeaten into submission, Dumbledore relaxed, too, and began smiling at Harry, again.

That smile died immediately when Harry laughed and told Dumbledore to "Go home and snog Snape," while slamming the door shut.

Turning round, Harry saw five unbelieving faces, staring at him. The Grangers just stared at him, while Tonks, who must have returned with Remus sometime during the confrontation, was imitating a fish on land, opening and closing her mouth continuously, with her spectacular hot-pink hair standing straight up. Remus looked at him in utter horror, while Hermione looked disgusted.

"What?" he asked.

"Dumbledore snogging Snape?" Hermione asked, wrinkling her face in disgust.

"That's nothing to even joke about Harry," Remus interjected agitated, "I nearly lost my lunch when you said that and I still think I need to be obliviated of that mental image."

"As do most of the Order members out there, I believe," Margret laughed, and jumped with a terrified shriek when a loud bang was heard from outside the door.

Tonks and Remus immediately ran to the windows next to the door, while Harry instinctively brought a shield up and stood in front of the Grangers.

His back to the wall, Remus took a quick look out, but stopped at his way back into cover. He moved in front of the window, goggling out of the window, laughing hard.

Quickly, everybody ran there and took a look, just in time to see a smouldering Snape being portkeyed away from the street, while some others were helping Dumbledore to his feet.

"I can't believe that Snape was stupid enough to try blasting the door," Remus laughed, slowly sliding down to the floor, holding his belly.

While the Order departed, one by one, the inhabitants of the besieged manor went to lunch. Harry had to be aided by Hermione again, now that the adrenaline had left his system again, but was already better than before. They all chatted happily during the meal, knowing that there was no pressing need for action, but still, lunch-talk had mostly one topic.

"Ok, the good news first," Tonks took control over the talk. "We are rather safe in here. I doubt Dumbledore will get Aurors or Curse Breakers to beat down the wards, since that would mean he would have to divulge the secret. And believe me, these wards won't budge without a small army attacking them, and one taking heavy losses at that. The Blacks have been famous for their wards for centuries. You would have more of a chance breaking Hogwarts, since those wards don't kill you for making a mistake. Also, he doesn't really have anything on us which would support such a measure."

"So until he gets desperate or manages to fabricate something, we're rather safe?" Henry asked, and Tonks nodded.

"Ok, Harry, what next?" Margret asked.

Since Harry had made it clear that he wouldn't go back to Hogwarts, they discussed his other options. The general consensus was that Hermione shouldn't go back to Hogwarts either. You didn't need to be a seer to know that she would have a hell of a time there now, and probably end up as bait.

Remus, for one, was the perfect bait. If he were seen outside of the manor, Dumbledore might try to get him arrested for some trumped up charges just to blackmail Harry.

But since Remus was a licensed teacher, Tonks had a good idea to kill more than two birds with one stone and started to tell everybody about it.

"Please explain once again," Harry demanded after Tonks had blurted out her plan.

"With pleasure, Milord Black," Tonks grinned at Harry, hinting a devout dip while smirking mirthfully at him. "If you place a deposit of a thousand Galleons each, at the Ministry, along with an application for tutelage by Remus, a certified teacher, you will be exempted from the underage ban, no matter whether you actually are being tutored or not. That also would lessen Dumbledore's leverage of you not having proper instruction."

"So you are telling me that most purebloods are exempt from the ban simply because they have greased the right palms?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Don't tell me you didn't expect that," Harry harrumphed, earning himself a death glare. Even in his weakened state, he proved to be immune. He was the Boy-who-lived, after all.

"Officially, it's a deposit to cover the cost of reversing whatever trouble you cause while being tutored, and those cost will then have to be redeposited. Incidentally, the balance falls to the Ministry when you become of age, so in reality, you're right: if you have money, you can do what you want," the young Auror admitted.

In the following hours, Dobby was sent away to clean out Tonks' and Remus' apartments, and Remus and Tonks were given rooms in the Manor, while Winky insisted in cooking a huge dinner, although no one had the proper appetite. Tonks, the only one left who could move somewhat freely, had gone to fetch the paperwork from the Ministry.

While they were working their way through the pounds of application parchment, there was another knock on the door. Harry shortly thought it had an echo, but chose to ignore that.

A quick look at the clock revealed that it was already past eight in the evening, and the 'to be done' paperwork stack was still bigger than the 'done'. Sighing, and weighting the evils, Harry decided the guest, whoever he might be, to be the lesser.

He opened the door just a second after hearing another echoing knock.

"Strange, I say, my brother!"

"Yes, indeed; it is, my favourite brother."

"Really? Why, thank you - I am rather fond of you, too - but still, I would have expected a wheelbarrow"

"Or another wheeled contraption"

"Maybe levitation,"

"Or a featherlight charm."

"Still, I would believe the size might have been a dead giveaway. Shrinking charm?"

"I don't believe any man would use it in that situation, my beloved brother."

"Oh, of course, I forgot. Please strike that from the protocol."

Harry gaped at the intruders, who had given him a look over and that strange greeting.

"What are you clowns talking about? At this hour, nonetheless," he asked, incredulously.

"Your balls, of course," the left twin intoned, just to have the sentence completed by his brother to his right.

"We were expecting you to carry those enormous, probably metallic examples of manliness in a wheelbarrow, at least."

"That at least, my brother: Yelling at our revered Headmaster, and while hinting at his sexual preferences to boot! That is something not everybody would dare to do," the second one took over.

"No one, to be exact," the other one finished; and then they chorused a "Hello everybody!" beaming at something behind Harry. Turning, Harry saw the rest of the "Besieged" hanging on each other, laughing tears.

"To be honest," the left one intoned, "we want in. Whatever you have planned, we want to be a part of it."

"Yep, usually the most fun is being had where you are, and we certainly won't be returning to Hogwarts this year either."

"Even if they retract our expulsions," the other voiced concern.

"So we thought about opening the joke shop we wanted,"

"turning respectable,"

"being hard-working members of society,"

"or just joining you in your excellent adventure,"

"which we have watched benevolent since the very beginning."

They stopped for a second, drew their wands and chorused, "We do not have any intention of stopping Harry and his excellent adventure away from Hogwarts at all, nor of snitching anything we learn to the order, in any way. On our magic, so we swear."

"So, since the niceties have been exchanged, would you be so nice as to give us a helping hand in?" the right one intoned with a bright grin that made Harry once again question the Twin's sanity and develop a slight headache.

"Okay, but I am not adding you to the wards just yet. And at the first over the top prank, you are out, clear?" Harry relented knowing full well that forbidding all pranking would be like telling them to stop breathing.

At their nodding, timed to be exactly opposite to the other, probably intentionally just to make someone dizzy, Harry sighed, again, extended his arms and pulled the twins in through the ward barrier, just to be crushed by hugs and backslaps, before they went to greet the other people. Harry tried to memorize that the formerly left twin was introducing himself to the Grangers as Fred.

Settling down at the parchment laden table, Harry's first question was clear. "How did you get past the Order guards? I would have thought that this place would be surveyed day and night by now?"

"May I, George?"

"Your pleasure, oh brother mine."

"Well, using our vast intelligence, our seer abilities, and our unlimited skills, we found the perfect way to overcome this night's guard:"

This was followed by a dramatic pause, punctuated by Fred's conclusion.

"We slipped Dung a bottle of Firewhisky."

After the laughter had died down, Harry popped the next question.

"How is it at the Burrow?"

"Oh, mum is fuming; she is absolutely seething at your performance. She keeps on shouting about 'no respect at all,' and she 'didn't' raise you like that.' She even referred to us as being better mannered." Fred told them, to which George added, "Which made us seek you out to improve our education."

Hermione laid her hand on Harry's shoulder as he dropped his head and sighed. "Ron? Ginny?" she asked, hopefully.

A slightly more sombre George answered that question. "Ron is the usual prat, sulking about you having gone to Hermione instead of him, and how you always get everything. It seems that he was as interested in you as we always guessed, Hermione. Expect a tantrum if he ever finds out about you dating," he added, waving at the cuddling couple.

"Then he should have had shown it a bit more instead of picking fights all the time," Hermione snapped, "I can count the good, rowless conversations with him on one hand. I knew he liked me, but I came far behind food and Quidditch, and that's unacceptable to me. What about Ginny?"

"Oh, she's fine; you know, when we asked her, she told us that she is actually happy that it's you with Harry, because you won't keep her away from being his friend, like Cho would probably have done. Guess she knows you, Hermione."

Hermione smiled at that. It didn't faze her that the girl had immediately drawn the right conclusions. While she didn't confide in Ginny with all her fantasies, Ginny knew that she liked a good 'hero saves girl' novel as much as any other girl. No one else at Hogwarts knew even that much about her.

"And your Dad?" Harry interrupted.

"He's fine, as always: trying to calm mum down, and telling her that you might have reasons to act like that, that there might be some misunderstandings that made you act that way. You know, like Dad."

Harry had to smile at that. That's exactly how the gentle, understanding man would act. He just hoped Arthur wouldn't have problems with Molly for defending him.

Fred suddenly sat up. "By the way, this might interest you: Dumbledore is currently down two Curse Breakers. He tried to convince Bill to take Fleur to break down the wards here so he could grab Harry."

"Oh yes," George chuckled, "Bill declined, quoting that this wasn't the way he had planned to spend the next weekend – dead!"

"Seems he prefers spending the weekend snogging the lovely Fleur, which I can totally understand. Lying on her surely beats lying in a coffin any time," Fred joked, earning himself a cuff over the head from his brother.

"Watch it - we have female audience!"

"Sorry," Fred replied, sounding about as contrite as Lee during a Quidditch match commentary.

"When Dumbledore insisted that it was important, Bill just told him to shove it. Mum went ballistic at that, but quickly changed tune when Bill started talking about maybe having their wedding over in France at the bride's house, as tradition demands. They are currently over there, getting to know her family and taking a vacation on the beach."

"That's yet another reason mum is angry at you. She blames you for being a bad influence. Could you please show us how you do that?" George grinned, wiggling his eyebrows at Harry. "We would love to be able to influence near strangers from afar."

After some more amiable chatting and lots of laughter, the twins made their goodbyes, promising to spy and play blockade runners for them, for a price, of course. Harry asked Tonks to duplicate the forms two more times.

It would be a long night.

AN:

Embirsiphonelilathia entered the throne room to find a strange sight. All over the huge room, minions were standing in formation, shivering in fear while DerLaCroix and pfeil were calmly sitting on a desk.

The minions cringed as derLaCroix reached into a bowl on the desk and pulled a ball out of it. "6," he intoned, and suddenly, one of the minions vanished into a hidden trapdoor, his screams ending in a squishy thud.

She raced over to ask what was going on while the both of them made a mark on some parchment, before pfeil drew another ball. "32!" Another minion fell, the roars and cries indicating lions at the bottom of his trap door.

"What are you doing?" She yelled as pfeil marked another box or two on his parchment.

"We were bored," the Dark Lord Cliffy told her as he drew another ball. "71," he said and another minion screamed on his way down, drowned out by the sound of chainsaws.

"Bingo!" Pfeil yelled and started a victory dance as DerLaCroix crumpled up his parchment in anger.

Many thanks to my trusted Betas: pfeil and embirsiphonelilathia. The story would only be half as legible without them. And a big public kiss to embi for rising to my defence so viciously.

(Vaguely) singled out minions:

(You know who you are, and I'm watching you closely...)

About the OWL owls ;) Once they stepped out of the Fidelius, owls would accept letters. Dumbledore had these owls sitting in his office with the letters attached for days; you wouldn't believe the mess they caused!

Just because it's been brought up, don't forget that Hermione is the kinky one and Harry is the formerly straight laced one struggling to keep up with her expectations. That girl can be pushy sometimes. Of course, Harry is more than eager to push back. ;)

On guns. You know that in Britain, not even the cops carry hand guns? They don't even have clubs, only very sturdy antennas on their radios. They have to call an armed team in if they need firepower...

edit I have been contacted about this statement a few times, so I want to clarify. This was meant as a partial joke. I am well aware that they DID have clubs (and I think also pepper spray sometimes), but still, no 'Bobby' carried a gun. Sorry that my sense of humor doesn't translate well...

And my new special friend, since you want all characters completely changed from canon and something new, I'll have a midget Hagrid, alright? But then, no! It's my story - neener-neener-ne-ner!

Chapter 10: Breaking the Siege.

After Tonks had filed the kid's tutelage forms and theirs and the twins' NEWT applications - those two were too lazy to file them themselves - at the Ministry, things began to escalate rapidly.

The first and biggest piece of manure to be hit with the banishing charm was a Daily Prophet article in which Rita Skeeter dubbed Harry 'The Boy Who Killed'. Rita was her usual caustic self, attacking everybody, although in a very clever way. She attacked Dumbledore for not capturing the others and the Aurors for being too late. But her attack on Harry was a masterpiece...

"While no one can blame Mister Potter for defending himself and his girlfriend against the alleged Death Eaters, eyewitnesses claimed that Potter actually cast the first spell, starting the fight, and used a lethal one, without even trying to simply subdue the man. Since the same witnesses reported that this spell blew right through the shield of one of the Death Eaters, this reporter asks herself what kind of spells they teach at Hogwarts nowadays..."

She then carried on about the capture of Peter Pettigrew during the fight, and Sirius Black's exoneration after damning evidence from Pettigrew's interrogation. The resulting verbal attack on the Ministry managed to paint Fudge in a bad light while still having Scrimgeour look like a bumbling town constable.

Harry took Skeeter's antics in stride. After all, except for another very well hidden hint at his becoming a Dark Lord, he came out rather unscathed while Dumbledore was literally rotating over the spit. Also, Sirius's name was officially publicly cleared now. It was the first article of Skeeter's that Hermione had not edited yet still met with Harry's tacit approval.

Dumbledore didn't take the bad press, Harry's defiance, and their tutelage - which he thought implied the veiled threat of the boy leaving Hogwarts - too kindly. After a few shouting matches with the Headmaster at the doorstep, where Dumbledore accused him going dark and murdering people at whim; Harry refused to open the door anymore.

Tonks told him that Dumbledore actually had the gall and tried to have him arrested and put under his supervision for the same accusations, something that Scrimgeour rejected outright.

There was no way the new Head of the DMLE would oppose Potter after the boy had defeated He-who-must-not-be-named only a few weeks ago and just battled another team of Death Eaters successfully. To do that would be political suicide, especially since Fudge was very much in favour of Dumbledore and Potter being on the outs.

Dumbledore's revenge was a master-piece of psychological warfare. Harry wasn't sure how it came to be that he suddenly was receiving mail within the Fidelius protected manor, but he was sure that Dumbledore had done something with the secret to make it available to post owls. Remus told him that they had managed to get owls to the Headquarters before, but he didn't know how it was done.

Harry was literally showered by letters, mostly Howlers, from the Headmaster, Molly, and everybody else with a sense of entitlement, a Daily Prophet and access to a quill and parchment, or so it seemed.

The elves quickly took over and started fetching the letters as they arrived and popping them to a silenced room in the attic to explode safely. Still, Crookshanks made it a habit to leave the room whenever he saw an owl approaching after an ignored Howler exploded while he was sleeping not far away. Hedwig had taken to having long flights each night and only returning well after breakfast, the usual mail-delivery time.

Two days after the incident, leaving the Manor became practically impossible. Due to follow up articles and rumours, a few visits anywhere all ended in quick retreats as people reacted curiously, admiringly or with hostility, depending which slant of stories they accepted. Also, some Order members tried to force Harry to come with them at one encounter. Although no wands were used, all these encounters could have turned nasty, so they usually retreated quickly by their newly acquired portkeys and stopped going out at all. At least the people got tired writing him, and the Howler count started to dwindle slowly - except for Molly Weasley's. They even heard some of her letters through the enchantments of the 'Mail bomb room'.

Meanwhile, the twins came over every other day for an hour or two, sometimes to train, sometimes to bring news. Even the hilarious way they presented the news they brought couldn't make them less disturbing. While they kept peace with the magical world, the Death Eaters had started anew to bring terror into the Muggle world, and the death toll rose daily.

Instead of focusing completely on this, the Order changed their tactics to following and harassing Tonks all the time to get Harry, something that did cause some unrest among the more intelligent, or as the twins put it, "the less retarded" members.

Finding the situation annoying, Tonks took an extended unpaid leave, citing family reasons, which Scrimgeour granted, hinting that he understood that she was trying to protect a family member from harm. He would have made it a paid leave, but that wouldn't stand with Fudge. Tonks was okay with that and focused on teaching the teens with Remus, who took over charms and the more theoretical subjects, along with the whole theory teaching, since Tonks was more of a hands-on person.

*** Grimmauld Place, 17th July ****

"Stop waving your hand like a wand, Harry; you don't need that!" Tonks yelled. Since his wand didn't help him at all and was very severely burnt after that battle at Diagon Alley, they had just forgone it, which was fine with Harry, although Hermione made him promise to teach her wandless casting. And not just an 'I'll try' promise, no sir! She had stopped only shy of making it an unbreakable vow.

"I just can't do this!" Harry huffed. For a week now, he and Hermione had been drilled by Tonks.

Tonks tried hard to break his habit of doing the wand movements with his hand, which lead to trying teaching them some advanced techniques, like non-verbal casting and point-casting, the art of forgoing the wand movements and just casting with a point at the target.

Skilled dueller need those, lest they be ripped to pieces in one-on-one duels. Only the fact that the Death Eaters held back saved the teens in the ministry. At Diagon Alley, they were underestimated,

again. But there was no reason to think that they could surprise them again. The next time, there would be no pardon given.

Those two techniques would of course be faster than incanting and swishing a wand, although it would reduce the power of spells. Since Harry had enough power to spare, that wouldn't matter, since he could cope. Hermione couldn't do that, but the advantage of fast casting in a fight was obvious.

At these techniques, Hermione had a serious disadvantage. Her usual perfectionism with wand movements did hold her back, since she had problems doing magic 'the sloppy way'.

"And I can't either," Hermione huffed. "These movements do have a reason; they are needed! You can't just expect us to ignore them. Same for incantations!" she shouted with a stomp of her foot.

"Ok, sit down, you two. I think I started this wrong. I'll explain." Tonks said, and slumped onto a chair. As soon as the two teens had sat down, she started again.

"Sorry, I'm used to working with Aurors. Those have learned at least some wordless casting in school and are therefore a bit further along. Wordless and point-casting are NEWT level, 6th and 7th year, respectively. Your wandless ability, on the other hand, would nearly certainly earn you Mastery, Harry. If you can do wandless magic word- and motionless, all you would have to do is to bring evidence of you fighting against at least 4 wizards alone or of you slaying a dangerous beast single-handedly as proof of your practical experience, and the Mastery is yours," Tonks directly went off topic and into a tangent, like every time she started explaining something.

But this time, Hermione laughed out loud. "Would pensive evidence suffice?" she asked, and Harry started to grin as he cottoned on.

"What? Oh, you mean the dragon? He didn't slay it, so it's not enough. And the Ministry doesn't count, since he wasn't alone." Tonks countered.

"I believe my brilliant girlfriend refers to the Basilisk I killed in the Chamber of Secrets, don't you?" Harry stated with a smug grin, which earned him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Oh!" Was all Tonks could utter for a few seconds, blinking rapidly. "I think that should suffice."

"Yep, and for good measure, we should give them the memory of Voldemort's resurrection party, too," Hermione smiled.

"You wicked thing!" Tonks laughed, "That will confirm the identity of His followers, and shred every last doubt on His return. I like that!"

"Not to quell the euphoria, but first, I have to get this casting stuff done." Harry interrupted the giggling witches.

"Oh, yeah, that small issue remains," Tonks said, returning to lecture mode. "First of all, ask yourself why we use incantations and wand movements?"

Of course, Hermione instantly had the answer. "The incantation and motions are derived from the spell's arithmetic formula - they represent the magic and form the magic."

"Not exactly," responded Tonks, and Hermione's face fell. She immediately took a deep breath in order to object that this was in fact the correct answer, but Tonks simply raised her hand to stall her.

"Calm yourself, Hermione," Tonks told her, as the girl seemed about to tear into her, "you don't know the whole story yet. This stuff would only be taught after seventh year, when you go for Mastery. Remus does have one, and I have Auror training, so we know about that. He knows much more about the theoretic stuff, so better ask him later during your theory lessons for details, ok?" she finished, and knew that her boyfriend-to-be wouldn't know what had hit him as soon as Hermione was out of here.

"So, yes, the movements assist the magic in taking form, but the intent behind it matters the most. That is why you usually don't get the full effect of spells on the first try unless you know a lot about what a spell does beforehand or have a lot of power, simply forcing it to work. Usually, the incantation is also a hint on what they do, but you don't need them. If you know exactly what you want to do, you can do it without."

Hermione shook her head. "So if I know exactly what I want to do, my magic will do it?" That made sense. She always read far ahead in class, and she always got spells faster than the other students.

"To some degree, yes," Tonks told her, "It's easier if you learn the spell normally, and remove the incantation and motion after you know it. But you could also invent a spell that way, if you can focus enough on the effect you want to create. An arithmetic formula will give you the incantation and compatible supporting motions to make it usable for other wizards who lack that ability or have less magic."

Harry huffed. "So, by using spells, you can cast more easily, but it limits the better wizards? And wandless casting is the same?"

Tonks shook her head. "Well, yes, but wandless magic is a rare art, and needs a huge amount of power to pull off. You see, forgoing incantation and motions will already decrease the power of the spell. Since the wand is a magical focus, casting through it is much easier. Wandless casting is focused by intent and willpower, forming a focus, and thus uses a lot more magic for the same effect, since that focus is not a magic conduit per se."

As Harry only gave her a dumb look, Hermione came to his help. "Since a wand contains a magic material, magic flows easily through it."

Harry looked at Tonks. "Why didn't you say that?"

"I did!"

Harry turned to Hermione, asking, "Did she?"

"She did."

"If you say so," Harry grinned cheekily, which earned him slap on the back of his head by Hermione. Tonks sighed, stood up and decked him, too. The main difference was that Tonks actually left a bruise.

After that was cleared up, the teens started improving rapidly. It took both only a few days of training to forgo incantations. Actually, Hermione had managed to cast her first wordless charm the same

day, but it took Harry two more days to copy her feat.

Although he took longer than she did, it still would be considered a great feat by anybody, since less than half of the wizards were able to get it at all. Still, it would take them quite a while until they stopped occasionally slipping and incanting out loud.

Both had made some headway in eliminating wand movements, but that process was harder, since it had to be learned for every single spell, minimizing the motions step by step while keeping a firm visualization of the result; until only the slightest flick was left without losing too much effect. Hermione was able to do this for smaller charms, but for fighting purposes, she knew that she should better keep them. The power loss that she endured was massive.

Also, her inner perfectionist was banging his cup at the bars of her prison, metaphorically speaking, whenever she tried to do so. She finally settled for being able to do it if she wanted to show off or needed to, and left it at that. She didn't plan to become an Auror or Duellist anyway.

Harry, on the other hand, did fare rather well with the approach of a not so formalized magic, and rapidly improved his casting, although he still was no match for Tonks or Remus, at least in mock duels with hexes and jinxes only. If he went crazy on them with high-powered curses, he might overpower or exhaust them rather quickly, but they were probably still too good for him to last that long. Both of his instructors shuddered at what he would do to them if he had a working wand. Hermione still sighed every now and then when she saw her boyfriend cast wandlessly without effort.

His bone breakers were especially vicious, which he attributed to his experience with broken bones. He could easily visualize the effects, making those curses - which they practiced on conjured pig-halves, something that took a while for Hermione to stomach - downright nasty.

She had actually gotten sick a few times during training when a spell had produced a rather gory mess, confirming her suspicion about her fighting aptitude.

The twins joined them occasionally in training, and proved to be capable fighters, but they just didn't have it in them to use dangerous spells, yet. They couldn't help adding jinxes into their casting, which were not really harmful, but usually embarrassing. The unexpected effects proved helpful, but their tendency to play with their enemies was a double-edged sword.

Hermione found their approach intriguing, and soon got very creative in adding at first glance harmless spells into her fighting repertoire.

Harry still flinched at the memory of the depilatory charm she once shot at the groin region of the target dummy. Remus advised them all to be cautious, for that specific target area won't work well with some - mostly female - enemies. This comment made Tonks grin broadly and much to Harry's joy, it made Hermione blush slightly, too.

Harry was running as fast as he could, but no matter what he did, the Dementors were still closing in. He had burnt his wand to ash trying to repel them, but his Patronus faltered as they closed in on him. Stumbling, he dashed forward through the Forbidden Forest, branches tearing at his clothes and hitting his face and arms painfully. Running like mad, he had lost the Dementors after a few minutes, and stopped, panting and gasping for breath, his heart beating so hard that it hurt.

Doubled over, his hands on his knees, he tried to regain some composure as he heard the sound. Something was clicking in the trees around him. Looking up, he saw something he had wished ever since his second year never to see again in his life. Hanging in huge webs spanning from tree to tree, hundreds of dog-sized Acromantulas were closing in on him.

With a hoarse yell of sheer terror, Harry practically threw himself forward into the woods, trying to get away from the eight-legged terrors. Blindly, he stumbled through the trees until his foot became tangled in a root and he slammed to the ground.

Lying face down on the ground, he spun around frantically and saw an undulating wave of spiders flowing towards him. Scurrying away from them, he reached for a stone or something to defend himself, but grabbed something soft and warm to the touch, instead.

"Ouch!" Hermione yelled, waking Harry from his unpleasant dreams. Looking around groggily, he noticed that he was in his own bedroom, and it was rather early in the morning, according to the dim light flooding the room through the high windows.

"Damn, Harry!" a well-known voice came from his right side. "You know I like it rough, but that'll leave a bruise," Hermione lamented, massaging her left breast - her very exposed left breast. To be correct, it wasn't the only exposed one; there was a second one on her right torso, currently without massaging hand, and therefore even more visible while being just as naked.

Harry's conscious mind took a short vacation as he tried to come to grips with the view, silently thanking the powers that be that these beautiful mounds come in pairs. These weren't the first breasts he had ever seen - there was always page three - but these were the first in 3D, and they even had a real girl attached to them.

"See something you like?" Hermione giggled, and the resulting movement made it impossible for Harry to respond with more than an even more rigid stare. That rigidity quickly transferred to a different part of his anatomy when Hermione embraced him in a soft hug and whispered into his ear.

"Happy birthday, Harry - I thought you might like being woken up like this," she purred into his ear as she caressed his chest, snuggling into his side. And she was perfectly correct in her assessment. He liked it very much, and immediately started to show her how much he did.

As she tangled her legs with his, Harry could feel her legs still covered by pyjama bottoms. Apparently she had just forgone the top, but that was perfectly fine with Harry. She had taken his hand and was currently teaching him how much pressure she actually liked applied to Harry's new favourite toys. It took him only a few tries to get it right and both savoured the new way to get mutual pleasure.

"You know, I think I'll insist on being woken up like that from now on," he noted between mutually exchanged bites and kisses.

"And why should I... Oh!" Hermione gasped as Harry found a special place on her neck to nibble on. "Okay, I think we could negotiate... Just don't stop..."

About a week into August, the teens were starting to get bored with their daily training routine and began to explore different parts of the library. Harry had started to look into warding, and thus begun to read introduction level books about runes - much to Hermione's delight - and she always was around him, reading more advanced tomes while helping him along with eventual questions.

Their other explorations, on the other hand, were progressing nicely along the lines of a healthy relationship. By now, there was only a tiny part of uncharted territory left, which was usually covered by silk panties. A few expeditions had made brief surveys into that region, but they did stop without doing any environmental modification.

Those expeditions were usually nightly occurrences, since Hermione happily obeyed Harry's birthday order, and both broke the news to her parents that there would be another room available for potential visitors when they asked what she had gotten him for his birthday.

At this, Henry started singing a song and vacated the room, his fingers firmly planted in his ears, but Margret was happy with their decision to move in together.

Of course, she did ask Hermione about all the details she could squeeze out of her daughter in the next of their occasional gossip sessions. Tonks had also started joining them some time ago, changing their picture of the gentle, soft-spoken Remus forever.

Henry chose to ignore those happenings surrounding his daughter as much as he could, which gave his wife and daughter many opportunities to tease him.

Like at one particular breakfast, when Tonks started to comment about Harry's newfound studious nature.

"I didn't peg you for much of a reader, Harry. Seems like Hermione has finally had some good influence on you," she teased.

Hermione just couldn't let an occasion like that go to waste. "Yeah, I'm rubbing off on him!" she chirped, batting her eyes at Harry.

"Haven't you both proceeded past there already?" Tonks returned, just when Henry had taken a sip of his tea. The fountain he jettisoned across the table was remarkable. Tonks immediately swished her wand and vanished the mess, while the table joined in a good laugh.

Hermione patiently held her reply back until her father had continued his meal.

"Yeah, we have, but it's still one hell of a past-time!"

A long silence followed as everybody looked at the wall, and the tea covering a sizeable portion of it, dripping down slowly.

"Ok, you won, Hermione. That was at least three feet further than my attempt," Tonks broke the silence, sliding a galleon over to the girl.

Oh yes, there was a lot of fun made at Henry's expense.

One evening about a week into August, a loud, booming laugh filled Grimmauld Place. Curious, Hermione went to find the source, and found Harry in the living room, laughing loudly, his laughter having drawn her out of her studies.

She approached the laughing man of her dreams curiously, as he was slouched in the biggest couch, holding his belly and crushing an open book to his chest.

"What's so funny?"

"Remember how Sirius was always called a scoundrel, or rakish," he asked, between gasps for air and laughter.

"Seems to be a family tradition of sort", he proclaimed to Hermione, who had already been joined by the rest of the inhabitants, raising his book for all to read the title, History of the noble and ancient House of Black. He instantly was overcome by another bout of laughter.

Their curiosity woken, everybody took a seat, and when Harry had calmed down, he started to tell the tale.

"The Blacks were an old family, but in the late 1600's, they were nearly broke. They had started to sell their assets, and were close to losing everything - including the family itself, since they had only a daughter left to the line. By some quirk of luck, their fate changed in 1713, when on a visit to sell one overseas property, that daughter, Annabeth Venus Black, caught the interest of one Edward Teach, who actually bought that island.

Harry had to guffaw when Hermione blushed furiously at that name, while her mother perked up, too. Remus started to laugh, while Tonks and Henry were looking blank.

"You both might know him better under his assumed name of Captain Blackbeard," Harry clarified, laughing again when their eyes shot wide open as they recognized the name.

"That man, who despite cultivating his vile business image, was - according to this book, at least - in fact a rather nice guy, and a wizard to boot. After only a short time, he fell for her and they married, after he was adopted into the family and had changed his name to Edward Teach-Black to preserve the line."

"When his pirating days came to an end, he accepted a pardon and used the good opportunity of a bungled assassination attempt by a young English lieutenant named Maynard to fake his death. His crew actually won the fight, but they left Maynard and his crew with changed memories and a transfigured head that looked like Teach's," Harry continued the tale, shaking his head at the resourcefulness of the sneaky pirate.

"He retired to the Black property, which he most creatively called 'Black Reef', and the vast riches he plundered were the base for the new prosperity of House Black," was the summary of the last few pages that Harry gave the others.

"So Sirius was the great-whatever-grandson of Blackbeard? And the Blacks were pirates turned nobility?" Remus laughed, rolling around on the floor.

"I guess that makes Harry the Head of a pirate clan," Margret quipped, grinning at the intensifying blush on her daughter's face.

"Arrrr! Aye, aye, capt'n," Tonks snarled, having morphed into a pirate, complete with conjured eye-patch.

"So that's where Sirius went," Hermione said, "I knew it had to be somewhere tropical after he sent you that bird!"

"Right, and I believe, we will all go there, too, since that book hints that the island is unplotable, warded and can only be reached by sea or a permanent two-way portkey in the form of a nautical knot-board in the Lord's study in Black Manor," Harry answered, wiggling his eyebrows. He nodded at them as everyone's face lit up as they understood what he was referring to.

"So, all in favour for leaving here and moving to an island in the Caribbean, say 'ARRRR'!" Tonks cheered, and a group snarl sealed the deal.

"Ok, so tomorrow morning we'll go for a visit, then," Harry said, only to be shot down by Henry, who voiced a reasonable point.

"Bad idea, Harry - we should try tomorrow noon or evening, since we will have at least six hours time difference," he objected.

"Then I would prefer the evening, since it leaves us a whole day to prepare." Hermione suggested.

"Ok, folks, we'll make a short visit tomorrow, with just an overnight bag, then if it's fine, we'll move in permanently. And now off to bed everybody; I want us all to be well rested. This means especially you, Remus," Margret commandeered.

The day before yesterday had been the full moon, and Remus still looked a bit like it. He had spent the night in a cage up in the attic that all the magical inhabitants had transfigured together.

When Remus had informed them that he had to leave for a few days, Harry was having nothing of it, and was devastated as he apologized about forgetting to take care of this need of Remus's, who had given up everything to help him. Remus, being rather unstable emotionally because of the waxing gibbous moon, had embraced Harry in a teary hug and thanked the boy for seeing him as so normal that he even forgot that he was a werewolf. That led into a crying session joined by all the females that Remus and Harry

would rather have buried and forgotten. Fat chance Henry would ever let them.

After they had created the cage, Harry had even sent the elves on guard duty to make sure that Remus was safe. The standing order of the next days after the full moon for the elves was to make the attic room an inescapable playground for a lone werewolf. Harry and Hermione had thought about starting animagus training to keep him company, something that Remus friendly but firmly rejected for now, citing that they had already enough study topics on their schedule. He promised to work on it with them once they had a bit more time.

Everyone obeyed Margret's order without much grumbling, Tonks even yawning slightly, still tired, since she had held vigil for her 'Wolfie', too.

Hermione, on the other hand, jumped up and nearly dragged Harry up to their room. Not that he gave much resistance.

In spite of Margret's suspicions, Harry didn't get really lucky tonight, but, by Merlin, he didn't complain. Not a bit.

*** Later that night, in a dark hideout ***

Voldemort hissed as he was staring at the mouldy tome in which he had found the final piece of the puzzle. How could he have missed something so obvious?

It was a small, but critical error with the timing of his first resurrection. Due to the unique timing issues, and the incompetence of Crouch, he was forced to undergo the ritual in late June, after the solstice. But this tome stated that the resurrection needed to take place before the solstice to be fully effective.

Voldemort pondered a bit as he caressed the page in front of him. The later date could have caused this body to be unstable. This would mean that it would have started to decay rapidly, but it hadn't. At least not until whatever Potter did to sever the connection between them. So it must have been the connection to Potter had stabilized this homunculus body. That would make sense, since it was reported that Potter was significantly more powerful since that day. It was very much possible that their connection had siphoned

away a sizeable portion of Potter's magic to keep this body intact - blood was a powerful and incalculable factor in magic.

There was a big chart on the next page, displaying some dates and their significance in resurrection rituals. Voldemort was glad that this was one of the last remaining copies of the translation of the long lost original Egyptian scrolls on resurrection. Reading Egyptian glyphs made his eyes itch.

'According to this graph, since my body was destroyed on Halloween, the death day, the perfect day for resurrection would be Beltane, its polar opposite,' Voldemort concluded, with a raspy breath before coughing up some blood. He took a large gulp from the goblet of blood replenishing potion near his reading station, and leaned back into his stuffed chair as the potion ran its course. He was already up to a quarter dose every other hour to keep his body working. Severus had better hurry to find something to give him relief until he could rectify the error. He closed his eyes and started to doze off lightly, a nasty side-effect of that potion.

AN:

"Hmm, interesting," DerLaCroix muttered while leafing through today's content of the 'Ideas and Complaints' box. When embirsiphonelilathia had told them that they should have one of those, he and pfeil had at first thought she had gone crazy. Who cares what the minions think? But then again, there had been some good ideas to promote their takeover of the world, and in one case, a fine recipe for Shepherd's Pie for the canteen.

Now this one was different. This minion had the gall to complain. And more insulting, it was about something as unimportant as minions getting killed out of boredom! With a few clicks on the mouse, DerLaCroix had the pictures of the hidden camera they had installed nearby the box. With practiced ease, he sent an email to 'Embi', requesting that Minion #327 be transferred to the human shield squad.

Again many thanks to my trusted betas, who make this story much better and less embarrassing for me. And apologies for the long wait, we all three were hit by bad cases of 'real life', but hope to have this infection out of our systems for now.

Singled out minions:

The twins want NEWT applications, like Hermione and Harry, who also file for tutorial. The twins are just lazy bums who don't want to do the paperwork themselves. Bill's in France at the moment.

mwinter1: Blood wards are borderline, but still legal. And Dumbledore has played politics for far longer than anybody. Why do you think Tonks didn't even try to raise charges against DD? She knows they won't stick. He practically made all the laws and has all the convenient backdoors he wants, especially since he is the magical guardian over all kids in Hogwarts without magical parents. Muggle documents? They tend to vanish when in conflict with Wizengamot decisions. Also, a fic about a yearlong lawsuit between a hiding Harry and DD, which ends by being irrelevant as Harry turns 17, is not really interesting. But you brought up good points.

On guns - for the last time:

Don't ask me where Vernon got the gun from in first year. But it had to be highly illegal if he got it within a few hours. But back then, I doubt he was worrying about that. Anyone being at the point of tearing out tufts of his beard *winces*, is certainly waaaay into gaga-land.

And please, stop harping about officers carrying guns NOW! You forget that this story happens in the late 90's!

Chapter 11: Off to new shores

*** August 8th, Grimmauld Place (still), 8 pm. ***

The inhabitants, clad in light summer clothing, stood behind Harry as he looked at the display of nautical knots on the wall.

"I believe we should consider it enemy territory until proven otherwise, right?" Harry noted.

"Good idea, cub. Henry, Margret, please move behind Harry, Tonks, to their left and Hermione to her right. I'll cover the back. Wands out and ready. Shout your threat assessment out loud after landing."

"Remember to bend your knees before Harry activates the portkey, and to kick your legs to get upright before landing. We don't want to land as a heap of bodies, right?" Tonks reminded everybody. They had some experience with portkeys by now, but better safe than sorry.

Everybody extended one arm towards Harry who touched the anchor in the middle of the display with a whispered, "Here goes nothing."

After a nauseating, long spin through the flashing lights, they were suddenly feeling like they were in freefall. Expertly, they kicked their legs and landed in a crouch in the middle of a lush room in an obviously warmer climate. Immediately, Tonks and Remus shouted their "clear," and Harry and Hermione replied only a second later.

Lowering their wands, they separated and looked around the room, taking in its clearly antique furnishing and decoration. The room was coloured in a soft white and pastel pink, with subtle gold accents, just obvious enough to show wealth. Some ornate lounges and low tables with silver and gold candleholders on top showed that it was some kind of living room. There was a bell sounding in the distance.

When looking out of the windows, they could see that they were on a hill on a small tropical island, looking out over a lush jungle, with beaches in the distance and a small town down near one of them. The whole island couldn't be more than a mile across in every direction, and the house they were in seemed to be at one end, while the town rested on the other side, near the eastern beaches.

If they strained their eyes, they could even see crowds of people milling around the town. The other side showed a cliff with a beach about 100 yards below, as far as could be guessed from what you could see of the far end of that beach and cliff. There was even a small waterfall resting off in the distance at one side of the cliff, giving it a very 'wilderness' feeling.

Tonks let loose a low whistle at the sight. "As it comes to hideouts, it's not too shabby," she stated dryly. This sentiment was reflected multiple times as they all started milling around the room, looking at the various objects and furniture. Everybody relaxed a lot when Hermione pointed out the return knot-display portkey, which looked exactly like the one in the study.

Harry still stood at the window, staring out. "I never thought it could be so beautiful," he said in a dazzled tone, still mesmerized by whatever he saw. Hermione joined him curiously, and Margret and Henry also stepped closer.

"Yes, this tropical jungle is really something," Henry replied. "I find it as fascinating as you do, Harry."

"Look at all those flowers out there, and the birds," Margret nearly squealed as she took a closer look. "You are right, Harry, this jungle is truly amazing," she said, while Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry.

"What? Oh, the jungle," Harry said as she was pulled out of his reverie. "Yeah, it's nice, but look at this ocean! This water is so amazing. I never knew how blue it would be," he stammered in fascination.

"Come on, you sound like you never saw the ocean before," Henry chuckled, shaking his head at the antics of that boy.

"I haven't," Harry softly whispered. "I was only there once, on a stormy night as the Dursleys tried to hide from the Hogwarts letters. Hagrid came and rescued me. I never saw more than grey, moving ground through rain and storm."

"Are you telling me that you live on an island where it's nearly impossible to live more than two or three hours drive away from the

ocean, and they never went to the beach before?" Henry asked incredulously. Granted, there are people who don't like the sea, but even they show the ocean to their kids at least once!

"Well, they went to Brighton, I believe, every summer, but they always left me with Mrs. Figg. They never took me along," Harry said with a hitch in his voice, only briefly lowering his eyes in sorrow, before he again focused on the water, ignoring the horrified look the Granger adults gave him. Hermione silently clung to his waist, giving him the support he needed, vowing again to grant those bastards a visit.

Even Remus and Tonks were watching this exchange with concerned faces, but they never got to interfere as everybody tensed and turned when a knock sounded throughout the room, all peering at a set of extravagant white double doors with golden floral inlays on the one end of the room.

At Harry's call, a man in white cloth trousers, a shirt with a v-cut so deep that it might as well be open in front, and a scarlet vest entered. He was walking bare-foot and held an old tricorne in his hands. He seemed to be in his mid forties and had a weather-worn face with bright blue eyes. His head was shaved and gold hoops dangled from his ears. He stopped, scanned the faces of those present and gave a sad sigh before greeting them.

"Welcome to Black Reef. I am sorry to see the old Lord Black is not with you. Which one of you happens to be the new Lord or Lady Black?"

"That would be me, Harry Potter-Black" Harry answered. "These are Mister Lupin, Miss Tonks-Black, Mister, Misses and Miss Granger," he introduced his companions.

"Welcome, Lord Black. My name is Matty; I'm the boatswain of this settlement."

"You mean mayor? Isn't a boatswain a man in charge of the deckhands on board of a ship?" Hermione asked.

"Well, that's right, but it's tradition on Black Reef to address the mayor that way, Missy," Matty answered.

"If you would like to follow me into the next room, the 'Robery', we shall get you fitting outfits before I lead you to around the house and town. It won't do to have you here without some fitting clothing," he stated, indicating his own state of dress. "There is a dress code on this island." he grinned.

The women immediately agreed to that, and soon cries of joy were heard coming from the room.

Hermione had immediately chosen a light blue dress, shoulder free and with a flaring skirt, fitting for a governor's daughter. Henry and Margret had played along, dressing as the governors. That long walking stick looked rather fetching with Henry, while Margret really managed to fill out the dark green dress she selected, much to Henry's obvious pleasure as he was grinning rather lewdly at her. Sun protective umbrellas and hats rounded out the women's outfits.

Harry was led to a certain stack of clothing, since he was told of certain expectations he'd have to fulfil as Lord Black. With Hermione's help, his outfit soon was a copy of an old swashbuckler movie: tight black trousers, high boots, and an open-front shirt with a red sash around his hips as belt, combined with a red cape, a gold-embroidered black vest, and a wide brimmed hat with an ostrich feather on it.

After a short pause, she added a rapier in a sheath, held with a broad leather belt over his shoulder 'for rakishness'. Harry had no idea what to do with a rapier, but if Hermione's kiss was any indication, it looked great.

Tonks chose a crimson barmaid's dress, off which she ripped the lower half of the skirt, exposing a lot of leg. She insisted that Remus wear only tight red trousers, boots and a black open vest, which showed his muscular and very hairy chest, to which he agreed only after she whispered something into his ear and morphed into a Latin American beauty with a long, curly black mane - and a rather large bust, naturally.

After that, Matty gave them the tour of the Villa designated for use by the Governor, who by tradition was always the current Lord Black in personal union.

It contained many sitting rooms, a ballroom, a master suite, and 5 guest rooms, and was, much to Hermione's delight, maintained by human workers instead of elves.

When they stepped out onto the front yard, they right away knew the villa was cooled somehow.

The humid, salty air hit them like a troll's club. They immediately began sweating, and Remus and Harry noticed happily that their clothing was perfectly suited to that climate. Henry was a bit worse off, but Remus came to his aid with a cooling charm.

Harry offered one to Hermione, but she denied, claiming that with the umbrella, she felt fine.

When Harry didn't buy that, Margret laughed and informed Harry in a whisper that they wore the correct underwear for the time period, before she latched on her happily smiling husband's arm. When Harry was looking after her confusedly, Hermione giggled and told him three words which made Harry's problem with the heat even more pronounced, and kept him stealing glances at her deliberately swaying hips as she walked ahead in front of her stunned into immobility boyfriend.

"Not invented yet..."

ooOOoo

While they walked down the not even half a mile long path to the town, the women were pointing out the various flowers and birds to each other, squealing in delight whenever they found some new sign of paradise, and Matty turned to talk to Harry.

"Excuse my curiosity, but how did the late Lord Black die?"

"In a Death Eater attack," was the curt reply he got out of Harry.

"Oh, what a pity, we only had a short time to patch him up, he just stayed a few months, and never really left the Villa. We were hoping for him to return soon, so we could have him around for some more time." Matty lamented, and they fell silent for the rest of the walk.

When they were in sight of the wooden palisades of the town, still being about a hundred meters out in the woods, suddenly at least ten men stepped out behind the trees, clearly pirates, and with wands drawn. They immediately shouted "Stupefy!" in unison.

Remus and Tonks tried to dodge and draw their wands, but they got stunned from behind before they even could grab them. Harry's reaction was better. The moment they started moving their wands he threw himself at Hermione and the Grangers, knocking them over and to the ground.

While the stunners sailed over their heads, knocking his hat off, and taking down one of the pirates behind them, he had already raised his right arm and started casting as fast as he could. He hit the ground - well, Margret hit the ground and he landed on top of her - just as he had finished turning around while falling and cast the first spell. His bone-breaker slammed into the hip of one of the pirates, causing the man to spin and scream as he went down, while Harry rolled off Margret and jumped up into a crouch, aiming for the next.

Meanwhile, Hermione had drawn her wand and did what she knew was the best. She decided to cover Harry's back and cast a bludgeoner at one guy, clipping his side and send him arse over tea...grog mug into the underbrush, and then a protego, covering herself, her parents, and Harry from being shot in the back.

"STOP! EVERYBODY STAND DOWN! Lord Black, I beg you, please stop! I'll explain!" Matty yelled over the noise.

Before he had finished, Harry had already fired a cutter at another man's neck, which the man had dodged at the last second, and was half way through casting a blasting curse into a third man's face at a foot distance.

As he noticed the yell and saw that everyone had lowered their wands, he quickly raised his arm, letting the curse sail harmlessly into the air, glowing angrily red. The man in front of him fainted.

"Bring the wounded to the nurse and wake the Lord's friends! And bring me The Piece," Matty barked, and went to kneel in front of Harry while all the pirates disappeared or left.

"I beg your forgiveness, Lord Black; this was not how it should have gone. This was just supposed to be a test, I swear."

"A test?" Henry roared and jumped at Matty. "This was supposed to be a fucking test?" he yelled as he grabbed Matty by the vest and pulled him up to scream in his face.

"Please, I can explain," Matty begged, standing tiptoe.

"Let him," Remus growled, stepping closer, the wolf barely restrained and flashing in his eyes.

"And it better be a good one," a slightly groggy Tonks hissed. Henry reluctantly released the man and patted the dust off his own clothes. Matty immediately began talking for his life.

"It is tradition among us pirates that anyone has to prove himself worthy of a position. Therefore, the new Lord Black will always be ambushed by his crew once. It traditionally consists of one volley of stunners, taking down all his escorts to prevent any accidental injuries, and then we watch his first reaction. Does he attack, defend, flee, or break down whining. No one expected you to cast so fast that we would be unable to shield. Normally we have enough time to prepare while the Lord draws his wand. We didn't know you were able to cast wandless."

A soft sigh was heard in the background. Hermione always did that when wandless magic was mentioned. She had still made no inroads at it, and was slightly depressed about that.

"You're lucky, Matty. I cut the head off the last arse that sent a spell at my girl," Harry said as he glared at the man. Matty had no problems believing that story. In merely two seconds, the young man in front of him had badly injured one of Matty's men and only due luck and mercy not killed two more. That man was prime quality Captain Material.

"Has he at least passed?" Margret inquired tartly, trying to shake the leaves and stuff out of her hair.

"Oh yes, Madam - with flying colours!" Matty grinned, "The crew will have no qualms about following your lead, Milord. It's my pleasure to

be able to show you a traditional secret for the Lords which have passed," Matty beamed at Harry.

"I am so happy, Milord; we have been waiting a long time for a Lord to pass the test. To our regret the late Lord Sirius left us before he was fully healed and before we could test him," he told Harry, getting really giddy, bouncing like Dobby, a truly strange sight for a forty-plus-aged pirate wannabe.

"I'm still pissed that you got me," Tonks grumbled, as she began to clean the Grangers with her wand.

"Do not feel ashamed, Miss. We had never failed before. First, we are pirates, so sneaking is our profession, and second, we actually put three of us on you and your partner, each, as we believed you to be trained bodyguards. You simply had no chance."

At this moment, a big group of men arrived and a bare-chested man approached Matty with a small chest under his arm. Matty opened it and produced a necklace with an irregular piece of gold dangling from it.

"What's that?" Hermione inquired.

"This, Missy, is The Piece, an old coin - a Piece of Eight - enchanted by Blackbeard himself. Only a Black who has passed the test may wear it, and it gives him and all of us access to the secret. "

He turned and addressed the men. "Hear me, you filthy wharf rats, I proclaim the test passed. Long live Captain Potter-Black!" he yelled, and the men cheered, throwing their hands in the air, and one or two even fired their flint-lock pistols into the air, making Harry and his friends jump. The other people didn't mind, as if it was normal to them. Matty then turned and offered Harry the medallion.

"Captain, The Piece and all of Black Reef are yours to command."

Harry, still a bit confused, took the chain, and not knowing what else to do, put it around his neck. The moment he put it on, he felt a compulsion rise and without knowing what it meant, he proclaimed, "The Revenge lies behind Skull Rock!", and even louder cheering was heard from the men, who were chanting "Captain Black!" over

and over. More guns were fired, and some tricornes were thrown in the air.

"Now will you swing your hooves, you scurvy scumbags? Spread the news and start the fires! Today we'll party 'til Davy Jones comes complaining!" Matty yelled, and the snarling, cheering group ran into the town, yelling about the new captain on the island. More shots rang out, and music started. Within minutes, the streets were full of people.

Matty led them into the town, and they passed a lot of worn-down houses, most looking like straight out of a movie. In fact, the whole town gave the impression of being a big movie set - including extras, and a lot of them. People in pirate clothes, women dressed like 'scarlet women', gentlemen and ladies, merchants and maids. And they certainly knew how to party.

After only a few minutes, they already had barrels on tables in the main square and big mugs distributed to everyone.

Some guys had a complete ox roasting over a big fire in front of a bar with a rotten wooden sign, where only a single 'a' was still legible.

Some pirates were already chasing some squeaking girls around the all-around balcony of said bar. Matty led the group into it.

It was a worn-down place with rough furniture and dim lighting. The bare ground was strangely soft, and there was a high ceiling with an indoor balcony and rooms upstairs for whatever they were used. The whole ambience had a slight resemblance to the Leaky Cauldron or the Hog's Head. 'Maybe there are franchise chains for hovels like that', Harry thought.

After Matty had thrown a bag of gold to the buxom barmaid, they were led to a table in the back, away from the band which was setting up their instruments.

In no time, the maid had unceremoniously kicked a drunken man off one chair and rolled him away with her bare feet; she wiped the table with a rag and invited them to sit down before rushing to get their food.

Tonks slapped Remus for letting his eyes linger too long on the maid, and increased her bust a bit to keep his attention focused, to which Margret grumbled that such a trick would have come handy when she had started dating Henry.

They immediately were brought some mugs, some jugs of wine, and bread and cheese. While they were starting to identify the drinks, some roasted chicken and other meat were brought, as well as a variety of cooked vegetables. The result was a table laden like a Hogwarts banquet, and the maid was eager to never let a plate go empty.

"What's in these mugs?" Margret asked, to which Matty answered, "Butter Grog. We do party, but we do not like the hangover. The wine is also charmed to be less alcoholic. Or why else would someone do that?" he concluded, pointing into a corner where a guy was lying under an open spud hole, letting the wine run free into his mouth and all over his face.

While they were tucking in, the party started getting even more out of control. Soon, the first drunk was stumbling around, and as tradition demanded, he pushed someone, who fell into someone else, and soon there was a big fight in place. Occasionally someone stumbled towards their table, but Matty usually had a bottle on hand to deal with the guy.

After the third shattered bottle, Henry had grown suspicious. Bottles just didn't not break like that. So he tried one on the table, and was baffled by how easily it shattered into small, blunt shards.

"Sugar bottles, charmed to be waterproof," Matty laughed, "where's the fun in bar fights if skulls are smashed?"

"And those men?" Hermione asked, pointing out of a hole in the wall where a window had once been. Some drunken guys were shooting at a mug on top of a bound man's head, aiming everywhere but towards their target.

"Oh those, those guns are only loaded with charmed rubber balls. They vanish on contact, leaving no harm, but administer a stinging hex when they do. No fun in being hit by an errant lead ball, is there? "

"So you have everything here prepared for brawling?" Tonks asked, her voice holding an incredulous tone.

"Of course! As you will certainly notice later, even the tables and chairs are prepared to break easily, and the ground in here and for twenty yards around the bar is permanently cushioned, in the likely case someone gets thrown over a balcony or out of the window."

"Are you all crazy?" Margret gasped, "How often do you have bar fights like this?"

Matty laughed a raspy bark. "Oh, only once a week; twice tops. You see, even with magic repairs, the cleaning is hell and the ingredients for hangover cures are hard to come by in these waters."

"So you are crazy!" Henry laughed, and toasted Matty with his glass of port wine.

"What is the point of living on a pirate's island without living a pirate's life?" Matty asked, and emptied his mug in one gulp before throwing it expertly at one guy stumbling across.

ooOOoo

A few hours later, with a good meal consumed and lots of entertainment, including a guy being thrown down the balcony onto a table, everybody decided to call it a night. The visit to the town was rescheduled for the next morning.

After they left the bar - or at least what was still left standing of it - they started up the sloping path back to the villa. When they reached it, Matty led them around it, over a narrow path to the beach behind the house. There, in the dusky light they noticed a big rock which slightly resembled a skull.

"You know, Captain, there is another tradition to follow, still, and it will answer the question you asked before," Matty chuckled as they approached the rock.

"It is tradition that the new Captain Black sleeps the first night on board of the Revenge." Matty grinned as they rounded the big stone and looked down into the natural harbour they saw before from the Villa's windows, about 100 yards below them, with sandy beaches,

waves splashing, which now included a huge, three-master ship anchored there, with the Jolly Roger flying from the flagpole at the stern.

According to the two rows of bright yellow rectangular flaps visible on the darker hull at the side and the guns visible on deck from their own raised position, that flag was not just a joke.

All of them let their view glance over the 3 masts, which probably reached up at least 100 feet or more into the sky, the sails strapped to the spars, ready to fall and catch the wind to drag the easily 150-foot-long vessel through the waters.

Hermione had to hold fast onto Harry; she felt dizzy and knew her knees would buckle if she let go of him. She knew, without a doubt, that today, she would re-enact a special scene from her beloved book. Looking up at Harry, she saw him grin and nod at her, which made her snigger and stare at the ship again, looking at the high square stern, surrounded by a narrow balcony behind which she knew the Captain's quarters must be located, grinning like Ron at the Halloween Banquet.

After seeing the ship and his daughter's demented grin, Henry groaned and slapped his palms over his face, burying it in them.

"Ten quid say she'll be a woman by tomorrow morning, at the latest," his wife whispered into his ear. He just glared at her and shook his head.

"Someday, your kind of humour will be the death of me. And no deal! That's a sucker bet if ever there was one," he lamented, and grimaced as his wife began softly singing an old tune. "Girl... Dadum-di-doo... You'll be a woman, soon..."

„At least, he's a nice guy." Henry grumbled.

"No," Hermione quipped with a broad grin, having overheard her parents. "He's a pirate!"

ooOOoo

The night was quiet, with only the steady splash-splash of the oars to be heard as Harry and Hermione were rowed over to the boat. As

they drew closer, they heard a rhythmic creaking and cracking, a sound that seemed perfectly suited to the ship they were approaching in the pale moonlight.

The Revenge seemed even bigger now, the hull raising everywhere at least ten feet above the waterline, and much higher at the bow and stern, where high superstructures raised the profile even more. The lower gun ports were at their eye-level, and Harry had counted 9 of them, and as many again in the row above, evenly spaced over the ship's length. That would mean that the ship carried at least 36 guns, and he had seen that there were additional ones on the deck. He shuddered at the thought of the havoc these could wreak upon their target.

Mister Parker, the sailor assigned to the task of rowing them over, expertly moored the small boat, or Wherry, as Matty had referred to it, abeam the Revenge, where some wooden steps with handholds allowed boarding.

Above them, they heard a bell toll two times. "Nine o'clock," Parker told them.

At their dumb faces, he started laughing. "On board, time is kept with a thirty minutes sandglass. It starts at noon, and every time it is done, it is turned and the bell tolls. After eight tolls, it is counted again. Two times eight tolls is one shift. Except for the graveyard shift, which is split in two shifts, so the crews rotate shifts," he explained offhandedly while he secured the boat with a rope.

Hermione nodded at that, and Harry was sure that he would understand it in a few years, but right now, it was not on his priority list. With a flourish of his hat, he invited Hermione to the ladder. After she had climbed up, he followed. Standing on the middle deck, his eyes swept over the mass of lines criss-crossing the air, the massive main mast, and the sleeping power of the guns stationed here. Parker had started untying his boat already, and rose to address them.

"I shall pick you up for breakfast tomorrow. Eight glasses, Captain?" he called, and as Harry's face scrunched up in concentration, Hermione replied in Harry's stead, "Too early. Better make it four glasses, sailor!"

With a crispy "Aye, aye," Parker pushed off and began rowing back to shore, where the lights of the villa were visible atop the cliffs.

"I thought we wanted to sleep in a little?" Harry lamented.

"That's why I told him to fetch us at ten, not at eight o'clock, silly!" was her laughing reply.

They made their way across the deck, marvelling at the new sights. Hermione pointed out the hourglass and the bell at the stern edge. Harry was glad he had read her book; at least some of the words she used made sense to him that he wouldn't have understood otherwise.

Leading him up some stairs on the port side, they reached the poop deck - Harry had to stifle a chuckle at this - which contained two more guns, the stairs up to the hut deck, the massive steering wheel, and the door to the aft cabin, the Captain's cabin. They went in and instantly knew that this was a wizard's ship. It wasn't that the lights flared to life at their command; it was the fact that while the cabin didn't measure more than 4 or 5 meters across on the outside, its interior was nearly twice that size.

A gun was stowed away on each side, under big tables holding charts on the port side and under a hanging cabinet on starboard. A king size bed was hanging on chains near the stern wall, swaying lightly. There was a door leading out onto the balcony, and a second one leading to what seemed a small cupboard, but did hide a small shower/toilet combo with a drain down into the ocean.

Harry had not missed the glances Hermione was constantly throwing at the guns. With a grin, he approached his girlfriend, who currently had her back to him.

Hermione was contemplating what she should do next to get things rolling when she felt Harry hug her from behind. While she started grinning and leaning back into him, she heard him whisper "Stupefy", and darkness claimed her.

ooOOoo

When Hermione snapped awake, the first thing she noticed was that she was lying on something coolish. Blinking her eyes, she noticed

that she was bent over and tied to a gun, gagged and naked on top of that.

"Ah, our guest is awake," she heard Harry speaking directly behind her, out of her sight. The instinctive embarrassment over being on display like that made her insides burn and sent a shiver down her spine. 'He really did it!' was the only thought she was able to keep in mind. She had told him long ago that she wanted their first night to be a re-enactment of her favourite scene, and he even had learned his monologue by heart for her.

When he finally reached the end of his lines, she heard him rise from his seat and approach her, his boots heavy on the wooden floor. Suddenly, a hand touched her ass, caressing it, and slowly slid up her back, leaving behind a trail of goose-bumps, and making her moan into the gag. As the hand reached her neck, it gave her a short caress and with a deft pull, her gag fell loose.

She noticed Harry squatting beside her, and turned to look at him. He had already taken off some of his clothes, and was currently only in his trousers and boots, his torso naked and glistening with a soft sheen of sweat. She unconsciously licked her lips, and not only because the gag had dried them out. Her breath was coming in bursts. He touched her cheek, caressing it, waiting, his eyes betraying his insecurity.

She gave him a short, brilliant smile and a nod, then watched his fear melt away, leaving only passion in his eyes. She knew the line he was going to say next.

"So, my little lady, what will it be?"

While another delightful shiver raced down her spine, she forced herself to keep her eyes open and to continue the game. With a well-played, panicked voice that was only betrayed by the aroused look she couldn't help but give Harry, she started begging the pirate captain to spare her life.

AN:

Embirsiphonelilathia was nearly pulling her hair out. 'Take the human resources, job you thought. It's the easiest job, you thought.

Damn, you, Embi!' she thought with a sigh as she switched the shovel for the mop.

"No,you couldn't be the chief assassin or in charge of the minion training, too much work! Why in bloody hell's name did you have to refuse being chief concubine in his harem?"she hissed at herself, throwing the mop into the corner and went to her desk finishing the paperwork.

"What a rotten day," she whined as she sat and began completing the paperwork for the Inland Revenue and the letter to the family.

Fifty new sign-ups, two training fatalities, and five random 'morale boostings'. And after she had shipped off all the bodies and letters and wanted to go home for today, this stupid sod had entered her office to hand in his resignation.

'I have to talk to maintenance, it's the second time this week that the deposit bag slipped loose of the mincer.'

As always, many thanks to my trusted betas, embirsiphonelilathia and pfeil, who keep this story worth posting.

Sorry for the long wait - maybe we now finally have this pesky real life put behind us, it resurfaces every time.

Chapter 12: New waters

*** August 9th, The Revenge, Captain's Cabin, some time early in the morning ***

Harry slowly awoke to the bell's tolling. He groped around for his Hermione, but after a few seconds, it became obvious that she was not there. After he blindly grabbed his glasses from the nightstand, a quick look found her behind the stained windows, out on the gallery silhouetted against the sunrise.

Not bothering to dress, he rose, stumbling a bit as the suspended bed smacked him in the calves on the return swing. With a wobbly gait, delightfully sore and still unaccustomed to the moving ground, he slowly followed her outside. She stood there, a thin blanket wrapped around her to ward off the slight chill of the moist morning air, staring out into the ocean dawn.

She jumped a little at his approach. "Oh, Harry. I didn't want to wake you," she smiled, which intensified when Harry wrapped his arms around her. "Remember to be careful when getting out of that bed; it hits you if you do it too fast," she warned him, giggling when he informed her that he had noticed that already.

With a slight wave of his hand, he cast a warming charm over her before he joined her under the blanket. "What are you doing out here?"

Hermione turned and snuggled into the chest of her Captain.

"I wanted to watch the sunrise, and was just thinking about last night."

"That was... intense," Harry sighed, pulling his girlfriend closer. "Was it how you expected?" he asked. Getting insecure, he added, "Or do you regret it?"

She took a short pause before answering shyly. "It was great, and I certainly do not regret it. Do you?"

A deep chuckle emanated from Harry, and Hermione savoured the feeling of him rumbling against her. "I'm a perfectly healthy male, so of course not. But I am afraid that we might have rushed things. Not

two months ago, we were just friends, and now..." his voice faded out.

A deep kiss answered all his questions. "I thought about that, too. I think we were just bound to happen. We were friends for so long that basically, we were a couple without knowing it. All that we lacked was the physical attraction part, and once we noticed each other 'that way', it just clicked into place, somehow."

He nodded his agreement. "Like we just caught up with what we had been ignoring for a long time already?" he asked, and grinned as he felt her nod and snuggle deeper into his chest.

"Did I do ok last night?" he asked, after a few minutes.

"It was perfect, silly. You even surprised me with stunning me to prepare everything!" she gushed. "That was brilliant. I had been wondering how we could get me tied to that gun without it getting awkward. I never thought about stunning me."

"Well, I just followed the manual. The story had the heroine waking from unconsciousness, and you said that you wanted it to happen exactly like that," Harry shrugged, hugging her closer. "I was really nervous about all that," he admitted.

"It was so sweet when you tried to confirm my wish while staying in play," Hermione cooed, before snorting a laugh. "And you were right; we need a different safe word. I didn't think this through properly," she admitted.

"Yeah, I really panicked when you started begging for mercy," Harry chuckled as he reminisced about last night.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said as she put a few kisses on his arms encircling her. "Thank you for playing along with my fantasy. You know, dreams..."

Harry snorted. "You know that I have at least thirty or forty guns here on this boat to break in?" he laughed, waggling his eyebrows, earning himself a good-natured slap on the chest. Planning for a little revenge, she rose to tiptoes and whispered into his ear, "Play your cards right, and we might do that. Maybe I'll let you even load my other barrel too, someday."

"Huh?" Harry said, and "Ooooooh!" a few seconds later when the coin dropped. The look that had come across Harry's face sent Hermione into a fit of giggles. She was shaking so hard that she was forced to cling onto the handrail to stay upright as Harry absorbed the new information he'd just received.

"Right, I need to practice a lot before I'll have earned that privilege," Harry sighed.

"Oh, come on, I told you it was ok for me," Hermione harrumphed, "no one expected you to be a sex-god! I really liked it!"

"But you didn't..." Harry began, but stopped as she turned to face him, glaring. Her hands were at her hips, granting him a magnificent view of her nude body.

"If you ever want a repeat of tonight's events, you stop this instant, Harry James Potter!" she hissed, now waving an extended finger at him fiercely, poking him in the chest at each word of his name.

Harry gulped. It never bodes well when a girl calls you by your full name, not even if she's standing naked in front of you.

"Did you really expect to pop my cherry and have me start cumming like a freight train? The first time hurts, Harry, and my body is not yet used to having an object that size stuffed into it! It will get better with practice, understood?" she scolded, and at his frantic, wide-eyed nod, she hugged him fiercely, kissing him hard, before snuggling into his chest again.

As he noticed her getting Goosebumps, Harry picked up the blanket and wrapped it around them before recasting the warming charm, earning himself another, this time more sensual, kiss for his caring.

Harry was enjoying that immensely, when suddenly she broke the kiss and grinned at him. She then wriggled a bit against him, which made his enjoyment stand out even more obviously.

"Seems that there is another training session scheduled already," she rejoiced, and slowly slid lower, disappearing under the blanket, while Harry went cross-eyed...

ooOOoo

At precisely four glasses, the promised boat fetched them and brought them ashore. They made their way up to the villa, holding hands and chatting merrily. While Harry took a quick detour to a bathroom after they entered the villa, Hermione went straight to the dining room, where she found the adults at breakfast.

As she sat down and greeted everybody, still wearing a most obvious grin, her mother and Tonks instantly started beaming at her.

Henry, on the other hand, started frowning. "It seems like I have to have a chat with a certain boy," he grumbled.

Much to his imminent dismay, he had voiced that thought loud enough to be heard.

"Will that be the type of chat where a father threatens his daughter's suitor?" Hermione asked, her brows furrowed, and her eyes narrowed to slits.

But before Hermione could lash out at her father, her mother addressed her intended victim.

"Isn't that the conversation which is immediately followed by the one which leads to the father never again sleeping in his wife's bed?" she hissed at Henry, to whom it was becoming obvious that his attitude didn't attract any praise. The glares he received from Tonk's direction confirmed his suspicion.

Just at that moment, Harry entered with a spring in his step and a smile on his face. He froze in mid-step as he noticed that everyone was glaring at Henry.

Before he could utter any question, Margret addressed him, in an overly sweet tone, while she continued to glare at Henry. "Harry, dear, would you be so kind as to lend me your boat for today?"

"Eh... Sure. What for?" Harry stammered, while cautiously padding over and taking a seat between Hermione and Remus.

"Oh, nothing to write home about - just so I can properly keelhaul my husband," she chirped, and Hermione promptly offered to charm the ropes to be self-hauling.

"I guess he commented our joint accommodation, didn't he?" Harry stage whispered to Remus. Remus just grinned into his tea and continued watching the women glaring at the cringing Henry.

The ensuing breakfast at the Villa was nonetheless nice, after the women had glared Henry into submission. Everybody was chatting happily about the island, their impressions, and the night. Everybody was asking the teens repeatedly about the boat, and everybody laughed heartily at Henry's flinch every time it was mentioned.

A bit later Matty entered and, after a short talk and donning proper clothes, in case of the adults, took them for a visit to the town.

ooOOoo

When they walked through the town, they noticed that though all the people still wore the pirate clothes, it seemed like any normal town. In fact, it could have been Hogsmeade, only in a Caribbean setting, and with most of the people carrying weapons in addition to wands.

There were some children running around, and some people out shopping. They had a grocery at the town square, and a single street that ran in a circle to the harbour and back. Matty told them that the town was relatively self-sustaining, with only some goods like grain and metal needing to be imported, along with luxury goods. For that reason, they had the Pathfinder, a 60-foot brigantine they used for trade and 'appropriating' merchandise.

That boat was anchored a bit off the harbour, which housed only small boats for ferrying and fishing. Some fishing boats could be seen out on the ocean, near a white area of waves on the water, which as Matty told them was the reef that sheltered the harbour. There was even one relatively modern sailing yacht in the harbour, which Matty told them belonged to a couple of young Muggles. It had been damaged in a storm and ran ashore on the island after a few days of drifting helplessly. They decided to stay, and did supply runs to the Muggle islands with their boat to earn their living.

The group was a bit surprised to hear that there were actually half a dozen Muggles living on the island.

"Captain," Matty chuckled at him as he mentioned that. "Where do you think we got that crazy stuff like yesterday from? This all began when the Fairchild's, who own that boat, took some of us to Florida for a weekend, about five years ago," he said, smiling in reminiscence.

"Since the means to have fun here on the island are rather limited, we just adopted what we saw. Got out of hand a few times before we made some sensible adjustments for safety," he explained.

"You know, that would have never been possible under the old Lord Black," he sighed. "He was never fond of the settlement, but as he disliked the climate and the sea, he rarely came back, especially after he failed the test badly. We were pretty much left alone for nearly fifty years before Lord Sirius showed up here," he added, looking a bit sour. "He was just as bad as the other 'bloods, only the family oath Blackbeard gave his men to protect them on this island kept him from chasing us away," he said as he showed them around the pier and the stands of the fishermen.

"So this bar-fighting and these clothes are just a game?" Harry laughed out loud.

"What's wrong with our clothes?" Matty replied puzzled, looking all over himself as if to find something out of order.

"And the weapons?" Harry quickly changed the topic.

"Just in case the blood's stumble across our settlement. It happened once, eight or nine years ago, and they thought that they just had to land and demand fines for illegal settlement. We objected," he grinned nastily at Harry, "and took the chance to replace our old boat with the Pathfinder."

"Hey, no need to worry, Lord Black," Matty hastily said as he noticed the group exchanging worried glances. "All people living here have to take an oath to never betray the island and one of loyalty to Lord Black. You all are under protection of this oath, although your bodyguards and your family would have to take the oath on the island, too."

ooOOoo

Next to the harbour was a small wharf for repairing and building small boats, and a warehouse. The rest of the economy was small business, often in small stalls in the nooks and crannies of buildings. Matty told them that nearly everyone here had a profession, and everyone traded and bartered amongst each other.

Hermione of course, noticed something about which she had to ask: everyone was using British money.

"That's because we're in British waters, Miss. All the Antilles and rest of the Caribbean, except for the mainland, is a protectorate of Britain. The magical population never seceded from the Commonwealth," Matty explained, which made Hermione look baffled.

"Hermione, don't you remember that the Ministry was able to remove Dumbledore from the ICW and reinstate him at will? Magical Britain still controls most of the Commonwealth, except for Australian and Canadian territory. That gives them an automatic majority there," Tonks explained.

"So we are still on British soil?" Harry snapped. "Great! So it's just a matter of time until I'm found?"

Matty snorted and shook his head. "I don't think so, Captain. All these Islands are warded so that there is only one entry point for portkeys and no in or outbound apparition. When this island was warded, there were rune stones sunk into the ocean at the ward boundaries. It all went fine until it came time to set the stones for the weather wards to avert storms. After the ship had set the first stone, it was hit by an unexpected, nasty storm and got seriously damaged. The crew was forced to abandon ship and it sank."

"Because of that, the remaining three stones were all placed on a single point, which created a zone of magic interference of which you might be aware," Matty said, and was interrupted by Hermione's outburst.

"The Bermuda Triangle! So we're in the middle of it?"

Matty laughed again. "That's what everybody would think, Missy. But in fact, that ship was blown far north in this storm. We are only a few miles northeast of Bahama, near Grand Abaco."

Henry had to laugh out loud at that. "So anybody looking for this island would start looking hundreds of miles north?" he inquired, and Matty shot him an evil smile and a nod.

Harry let a relieved sigh escape at the good news. "Ok, so we are reasonably well hidden. How firm is the British control?"

"Not very, Captain. Most Aurors are only in the Capitals. In the Bahamas, wizards populate 6 of the 700 islands, at least major settlements, while Muggles inhabit 30. All in all, there must be about 1500 wizards in all Bahamas, but only 50 purebloods."

"Wow! That's a huge population. But why are there so few purebloods here?" Hermione asked, and Remus couldn't help but let the teacher inside of him show.

"How many students graduate from Hogwarts every year?" He asked in return

"We are about 40 in our year and it's about the same in the upper years, so I guess about 50 on average," Hermione said after a short look at Harry.

"Wrong. Hermione, you are children of the first war. Not many magical parents had children in that time, and most non-pureblood children were killed along with their parents. Hogwarts usually houses near to 1000 children, but for the last few years, it's averaged close to 500. Next term there will be 150 children starting their first year, those born about a year or two after Voldemort's downfall, when everybody went back to living without fear. In a normal year, about 100 to 150 students graduate," Remus solved and chuckled a bit at the baffled looks the children sported.

"That's a lot!" Harry commented dryly.

"Yes, it is. But back home, most of the economy is controlled by purebloods, and there isn't much growth. Therefore, there aren't many jobs available. Also, the Ministry isn't open for Muggleborn," Remus continued explaining. "Hence, a lot of Muggleborns and

Halfbloods settle in the Muggle world and some leave Britain and settle in the Colonies after graduation."

"Why is that?" demanded Hermione.

"You see, we have two real wizarding settlements in Britain - Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. And even Hogsmeade has only a few hundred inhabitants. The whole economy is concentrated there, and because of Apparition and Floo, there is no need for local stores. Nor is it easy to compete with the long-standing pureblood businesses. The twins might be the first in known history to manage to put pressure on an older company, since they really outshine Zonko's; at least with what little I've seen of their stuff. Over here, there are so many people and settlements that it's impossible to have everything in one place."

"Aye, Remus, there's no Floo here, and a lot needs to be shipped since you can't portkey goods too big to pick up and hold. It gets old - and very expensive - fast if you have to portkey grain and ore by the sack. There are portkey centres on each island, but other portkeys are in-island only. Also, the distances are too long for island hopping by Apparition, even if it weren't for the wards. So there is enough work for everyone," Matty added.

"And why aren't there more Purebloods over here, then?" Margret inquired. "I mean, it's so beautiful here, and if there are so many possibilities?"

Remus had to think a few moments before he could voice his thoughts. "That's a bit harder to explain. You understand that since these islands are British territory, the officials are sent by the Wizengamot?"

"Arrrgh, Matey," Matty snarled, "Those damned 'bloods are in control of everything. They are appointed as Governors for the islands, and get themselves big plantations. They control shipments to Britain and tolls between the islands - that's the main reason for those wards, except for defence. They have some loyal Halfbloods as Auror forces, and use them to suppress the rest of the people. To hell with them!" he finished, and spat onto the ground in disgust.

"Really? What do they do?" Tonks asked and got a real earful about taxes, corruption and overstepping authority. The Governors

seemed to milk the population for all they were worth. They controlled most inter-island to island shipping, and therefore took a good share from every grain, screw, or whatever sent, along with hefty portkey fees. They even stopped and controlled every private magical ship they encountered for contraband, in most cases demanding bribes for letting them go if they find nothing. Only the fleets of the big trade companies, buying for Knuts and selling for Galleons, were left unhindered.

After Matty had finished slandering the 'bloods' seven ways to Sunday, Remus continued.

"That actually proves my point. Most of the Purebloods don't want to live here. They want to be in Britain, attending their parties, dabbling in politics, and generally sitting on their wealth. Over here, they have to actually work and don't have many others with whom to mingle. Also, they don't want Muggleborns around. They are sent here to work for the benefit of the big shipping companies of some purebloods, keeping the trade going and lucrative," Remus added, noticing a fierce snarl on Harry's face.

"And yes, I know that means Voldemort is funded more or less directly by the money and goods they make here," Remus voiced the thoughts Harry had, before continuing his first train of thought.

"So you see, they mostly just want to raise as much money as they can and then go back to fancy London. An appointment over here is just a way to quickly raise funds and gain points within the old pureblood circle," Remus concluded, earning himself a pensive, but thankful nod from Hermione. They continued their tour, but Harry couldn't shake the thought that even on this remote island, the ghost of Voldemort still lingered.

ooOOoo

They continued the tour back into the town and went past some small businesses until Matty stopped them next to one. Harry and his friends were just surveyed the house, whose sign proclaimed to be a 'Lenny's', whatever that was supposed to be. Matty gave them the answer.

"Captain, we should visit Lenny, our black- and wand-smith. He might have a solution for your wand problem. Either way, we have some business with him, anyway."

Despite the cryptic statement, Harry gladly complied and stepped through the double doors into the dark shop. It was really dark, and they needed to wait a few moments for their eyes to get accustomed to the dim lighting in order to take in everything.

The main attractions were the huge anvil near a corner in the back, nearly four feet long and one across, and lots of tongs, hammers and strange metal spikes of various sizes and shapes in a rack on the wall. One corner held a row of four long magical fires, each four feet long and blazing in different colours, from dull red to white. Lots of metal stock was piled next to it.

A huge man with bulging muscles, not as tall as Hagrid, but probably as strong, was pounding a piece of iron on the anvil. The sound of his blows was deafening, now that they had entered the shop. 'There must be some serious silencing charm on the doorway to keep the neighbours at peace,' was Harry's first thought as he covered his ears.

Matty yelled something the group couldn't understand, but seemingly it was discernible enough for the man. He stopped his blows and nodded at the group. He took the item, which Harry now identified as a blade of some sort, and shoved it into the dull red fire. He quickly tidied up his anvil and put the tools into the rack before he came over.

"Matty! Good to see you! And this strapping man is our new Captain, I presume," the man, Lenny, greeted them in a voice as booming and loud as his anvil. "I have worked all night, and just finished it an hour ago. Next time give me a bit more time, you old slave driver!" he laughed, drawing a long, crooked wand out of his trousers, tapping his ears and then swishing it around. The opaque windows went clear and light flooded the shop.

A gasp went through the group when they saw the rest of the shop. The walls were filled with swords, sabres, daggers, and other nasty instruments. A rack housed flintlock pistols and guns of various sizes and a shelf displayed some fancy wands.

A desk with various tools was in the background, and a sturdy counter finished the furnishing.

Lenny went straight to the counter and reached below it. He produced a sword with a fancy wrought basket hilt and a narrow scabbard. When he unsheathed it, it proved to be about three feet long and about than an inch wide at the hilt. Turning it left and right, he gave it an approving look as the mirror-polished blade gleamed in the light. It was a rapier, and a very elegant one at that. Upon closer scrutiny, Harry noticed the crest of Black in the ornamental hilt.

Lenny re-sheathed it and handed it over. "Your sword, Captain. May it serve you well," the man said, now at normal volume.

Hermione bit her lip as Harry wrestled with his sash and belt combo, removing the plain run-of-the-mill sword and slipping the new sword into place, all while repeatedly thanking the man. She nearly squealed as she took in his new, even more dashing figure.

Harry drew his sword and gave it some experimental swings. Not that he knew anything about swords except for his stint in second year, but it felt great. It moved quickly and precisely and was nearly weightless. When he inspected the blade, Hermione pointed out runes for sharpness and another set that made the blade unbreakable, next to a mark of crossed bones.

Matty cleared his throat. "Excellent work, as always, but there is more business to be done today, Lenny. Captain Black is in need of a new wand, too."

The man perked up at that notice. "A wand?" he said, rubbing his hands happily.

He grabbed a meter and started measuring Harry, just like Ollivander had done all those years ago.

"What was your last wand, Captain?"

"Holly and Phoenix feather," Harry replied without missing a beat.

"Oh, what a powerful combination," Lenny muttered. "We should try Thunderbird cores first; they are similar," Lenny told Harry, and fetched a chest from a cupboard under the displayed wands.

It took only a few tries until Harry had found the first suitable wand. It was hawthorn with a Thunderbird feather. It lasted exactly 10 seconds under his Patronus before it grew too hot to hold. Over the next half hour, Harry tried every wand in stock, and found plenty of matches. But in the end, no wand could withstand his power for long. Two were even destroyed while testing. Lenny was far from fuming, in fact, he was happy like a birthday-boy. Harry remembered Ollivander's behaviour back then and came to the conclusion that all wand smiths were mad.

"Oh, that is marvellous. There hasn't been a Captain so strong for centuries," Lenny chuckled and clapped his hands. "But what can we do for you, Captain? How can I help you?" he pondered while walking around in his shop, deeply in discussion with himself.

"Maybe, hmm... No. But what if..." he trailed off.

At this point, Lenny stopped pacing and gave Harry a long, calculating look.

"Why not? Worst case, it can only fail," he stated, oblivious to everybody's confusion. He took some quick steps over to the wands laid out on the desk. They had found six suitable wands for Harry.

There was the Thunderbird one he had matched first, a very attractive birch wood with a Narwhal horn fibre, and another one, ash with Thestral hair. Lenny told them proudly that he was one of the few wandmakers to use them, mainly because not many in the peaceful profession could actually see them.

The last two wands were something special. They contained giant squid tentacle fibres from a dead giant squid that had washed ashore a long time ago, in Blackbeard's era, with its body kept in stasis in a sealed cave ever since.

Nearly every wand with that core material proved to be a match to Harry; a fact that made Lenny state that Harry seemed to have an affinity for the multi-armed creature, which Hermione commented with a snorted "Figures!"

"So giant squids are real?" Henry asked. "How big are they?"

"Honestly, Dad, didn't I write you that there was one living in the Hogwarts Lake? It's about 70 feet in length." Hermione said, but was corrected immediately by Lenny.

"The Sweetwater variety is, yes, but the maritime kind of the species grows to thrice that size," he chuckled, his back still turned to them, bustling with the wands. "For some stupid reason, some of the Muggle inhabitants on the island started calling it Cthulhu after seeing it once, but they refuse to tell me why," he grumbled, without noticing the Grangers share a quiet chuckle, and in Hermione's case, an exasperated eye roll as her mother seemed to recite some rhyme under her breath. Hermione hated those books.

Lenny's hand still hovered over the wands, as if deciding on something, and then he grabbed the Osage Orange/giant squid wand from the pile. "I believe this one is the best standard duelling wand for you. It will certainly stand up to daily use, and the wood is sturdy enough to resist wear and tear. It will even hold up for battle use, as long as you don't use any long-time duration or too high-powered curses."

He gave the slightly warped and surprisingly heavy wand to Harry, who once again had to marvel at the smooth and strong surface of the wood and its deep honey colour.

"Give me a day or two and I will have a customized wand for combat purposes," Lenny told his visitors, and turned to scrutinize the 'Harry' pile of wands a bit closer, ignoring the present company completely. Recognizing a dismissal, the group filtered out.

ooOOoo

Happily chatting, they sauntered through the small town, perusing the various displays of merchandise and generally savouring the feeling of the town. Finally, they turned back up to the island centre, towards the villa and especially the Revenge.

Deciding to give a long overdue tour, the teens had Matty lead them down to the beach, where the boat was lying ashore. Tonks at first lamented that she wanted to apparate over, but Matty told them to let it be if there was no emergency. There was no better way to splinch yourself than apparating on or off a heaving ship.

They took some time to get organized, but finally they had Matty and Remus at the oars and Harry at the rudder, and pushed off. Matty's experience was able to balance Remus's untrained power at the oars, and Harry had to learn steering anyway, according to Matty.

The landing was not as smooth as the evening before, but the boat did not hit the ship hard enough to cause damage or to throw people overboard. Matty gave Harry some pointers for the next try and then showed them how to tie the boat alongside.

Climbing aboard, there was an awkward moment as the women, conscious of their state of underwear and the broad daylight, were adamant that they would certainly not climb up first, while Matty stated that it would be safer if someone was behind them to catch them in case of a slip.

Given that their dresses, at least those of Margret and Hermione would probably cause a slip and knowing Tonks, they knew that precaution was necessary. Hermione finally solved that problem by pulling the back and front of her skirts in their respective opposite directions and fixing them against the front and back of her dress with sticking charms, creating some kind of trousers, albeit very fluffy ones. Repeating that for her mother, she cast off her shoes like the night before and nimbly climbed up the in-built ladder on the ship's hull.

Once aboard, the adults were nearly floored as they took in the details of the ship. They went through the whole ship, from bottom to top. Remus and Harry even climbed up to the topmast spreader, the highest reachable point of the masts, to enjoy the spectacular view.

Tonks wanted to climb up too, but that was vetoed by Matty, after he had seen her nearly fall off the boarding ladder twice. Everyone else agreed with his reservations.

Especially the richly carved and oversized Captain's quarter was an immediate hit with the women, while Remus only grinned at the still tussled sheets, a fact Henry valiantly tried to overlook. Someone could think a notice-me-not charm was on the bed by the way Henry's eyes jumped across it as if that space didn't exist.

Hermione was fascinated by the amount of rune work that went into such a ship. There were runes to prevent ripping stitched into the

sails, impervious rune sets almost everywhere, and fortification rune sets all over the hull, rendering the whole ship unbreakable. All the ropes were charmed to be easy to pull so theoretically just two men per shift were needed to operate the sails.

The guns were enchanted to use either massively overcharged reductor hexes for short-range combat or banishing charms for hurling balls or different shot, and would recharge fast enough to deliver about one shot every other minute. When real shot was used, it was brought up to the guns via a switching enchantment by ringing a bell over the storage box next to the gun. There were three bells for the different types of shot: ball, chain and canister. The ordnance was stored deep in the bowels of the hold, where it was safe and helped balance the ship. Since the shot was hurled by banishing, no powder was needed, and the shot was usually transfigured from water in slow times aboard to put the bored crew to work. All in all, the ship carried 36 guns on its two gun decks, the lower ones each capable of hurling balls of iron weighting twenty-four pounds, and the upper deck carrying only 'eighteen-pounders' for stability reasons. Additionally, the upper deck had 12 lighter guns, classified as 'twelve-pounders', two of them long-barrelled 'chaser guns' at the bow, designed to attack a fleeing target's rigging. Those 48 guns made the ship a veritable force on its own accord.

At one point, Henry had uttered some careful reservations about the Queen Ann's Revenge being smaller than this vessel.

This led to Matty explaining that this ship was actually commissioned by Blackbeard after the first ship grew too old, modelled after the original ship. Everything on the ship was created exactly to his specifications. The hull was twice as long and a bit more streamlined, and he had a second gun deck installed. There was a surfeit of enchantments added at his whim.

Those included the submersion charms - a novelty back then, now a standard - which allowed the boat to travel under water for up to 200 miles with a full magical charge, although at a snail's pace, only half the normal speed. While in motion, it would also have a strong muggle aversion charm on it, to which Harry should key the Grangers soon, if he wanted to take them on a ride.

The masterpiece of all these enchantments was the keel. The massive piece of wood held the controlling runes and acted as a

magical anchor and reservoir for all that magic. A good dozen charging rune sets were spread along its surface, collecting every tiny bit of magic they could.

Because of all the magic, as few as 12 men, 4 per shift, could run the whole ship if they didn't have to fight. To be battle ready, they needed 10 men on deck and at least 10 on the guns; a full performance called for 60 men. That was rather impressive, given that such a ship called for about a 500-man crew in the 'real' world. The crew's lodgings were actual cabins with bunk beds and community showers in an engorged area, and could accommodate 80 men easily, and could be stuffed to the brim with about 120 men, a veritable army in the wizarding world.

"That warding is incredible!" Hermione shouted with glee as they returned to the upper deck.

"I am still confused," Henry said. "I can't believe this unbreakable stuff. Does it really work?"

"Oh, it does," Matty chuckled. "A ship like this, with a reasonably full reservoir could take at least four to five broadsides from a similar sized ship without a scratch, before the charms are weakened enough to receive increasingly bad damage. Once the reservoir is drained, we'd better get the hell out of wherever we're in. But there are not many ships like the Revenge left, not more than two or three dozen, and there are only a dozen real warships carrying more guns left in the Caribbean. Most ships are smaller, like the Pathfinder, and carry only 8 to 16 guns. The trade fleet vessels are bigger, but they carry fewer men and even fewer guns and usually surrender at first approach."

He gave a sigh and grin. "What I would give if I were still young enough to go to sea. If you learn well, we can resume privateering big style in a few months. The 'bloods do need a good boot in the ass badly."

"So you are really pirates?" Harry asked.

"In a way, but there haven't been real pirates here for nearly two centuries. Barely a few handfuls of us can claim to descend from Blackbeard's crew, but we hold up the traditions, but in a more

business-like way, occasionally lightening the load of a 'blood's trade ship."

"I don't think I'm comfortable with plundering, Matty," Hermione said, and got approving nods from Margret and Tonks. "It's wrong to steal."

"Let me guess, Missy. You think we are brutal murderers who plunder villages, steal and rape, don't you?" Matty huffed, his face angry. Hermione instinctively made one step backwards.

"I dare you, go and talk to the people of Black Reef yourself. We are shy over 200 souls here, and nearly half of them are here because they hide from the 'bloods," Matty ranted at her.

"Me? Twenty years ago, I was fisherman near Port Wizengamot, Jamaica, and I did well. But then some 'blood found that my little bay, my inlet, was the perfect place for his new beach house. And he didn't even bother to ask. He accused me of smuggling, and sent his Aurors. And naturally, they found a huge stack of contraband in my house, not even hidden, but conveniently stacked in the living room. They took me and my wife to town and incarcerated us. The next day, they sent me to Nassau for the mines. I managed to slip my shackles at night and jumped ship. I nearly drowned, but managed to swim ashore on a small island. Two weeks later, a ship came by and noticed me. They picked me up and took me here. Since then, I've been living on this island. For several years, I tried in vain to find the whereabouts or a life sign of my Mathilda. For all I know she ended up as a plaything or worse, like many other missing wives. So no, we don't rob the innocent, and no, we don't rape. All we do is take back a little of what the 'bloods have stolen from us! So think twice before you try to school us," he spat.

With that, he went to the forecastle and sat on the bowsprit, looking down into the water. Everyone else was standing around awkwardly, except for Hermione who looked ready to cry. The other women held similar expressions. Taking a deep breath, Hermione straightened up and went over to Matty, sitting down next to him and talking in hushed tones. Harry wisely did not join her. He knew that some fights, she had to fight herself.

When Hermione returned after a few minutes of talking, she looked relieved, but not much better overall. Harry embraced her tightly and

gave a short statement that they would lay down before lunch and that someone should fetch them, then. Noting the barn-sized hint, everyone shuffled over and once Matty was informed, they quickly manned the boat and pushed off, rowing back, with Tonks 'womaning' the rudder. There was not much chance that she would mess up beaching a boat on a sandy, shallow beach like that.

Whispering sweet nothings in his downtrodden girl's ear, Harry guided her to 'their' quarters. He couldn't fight all her fights for her, but that won't stop him for being there for her in the aftermaths.

ooOOoo

They were roused from their slumber later that day when a loud call was heard over the creaking and groaning of the vessel. Both took a second to clear the cobwebs, and then realized that their taxi had arrived. With a last, lingering kiss, they separated and dressed. As Hermione was still feeling a bit tender from the previous night's events, they didn't do anything that would have called for disrobing, but the humid climate had lead to one item after the other being cast off while cuddling, leading to their present state.

Not wanting to wear the dress again, Hermione ruffled through the chests and cupboards in the cabin, finally finding some red trousers, long soft black leather boots, and a baggy-sleeved white shirt with a criss-cross laced v-cut. 'That should do nicely,' she thought with a feral grin.

Conjuring some knickers and slipping them on, she put on the clothes and cast some sizing charms on the trousers and boots, making both skin-tight. Frowning at the much too big shirt, she just cut the lower half off and stuffed the remaining shirt into her trousers, keeping the baggy look and the now nearly navel-deep v-cut. A bit of resizing to adjust the amount of bagginess and a few stitching charms to keep the strings from slipping and accidentally opening wide enough to really expose her later, she found the shirt acceptable.

The way Harry's attention was focussed on her breastbone proved her assumption and gave her a nice tingle, a very nice tingle, indeed.

Her ego gained a further boost when the man rowing the boat nearly fell overboard while helping her climb in. She couldn't wait to see her father's reaction.

ooOOoo

"Dress yourself!" Henry sputtered when he saw the unsettling amount of cleavage his daughter presented.

"Aw, don't you like my new style?" Hermione mock pouted.

Henry couldn't say so. It was not that she actually was flashing anything, not at all, and her latest style of bikini was far more exposing, but that shirt swayed, nearly perpetually in motion, and it always seemed as if she might flash a nipple any moment. The flashy red trousers and the mid-thigh high boots added to his discomfort. It was not that it looked bad - if she were anyone else, he certainly would appreciate the sight, but this was his princess! With boobs! He didn't want to know about that fact! Why couldn't she just stay eight-years-old, when dolls, or in her case, books were the most important?

"I do, and so does Remus, obviously!" Tonks quipped, which made the last Marauder come to his senses and quit ogling. He didn't look any less mortified when Tonks patted his head in a maternal gesture and cooed, "It's alright, darling; I'll ask her for stitching patterns later," in a stage-whisper.

"I believe I saw something nice to accessorize that in the Robery yesterday," she continued, now addressing Hermione with a wink. Ten minutes later she brought her a green belt that was perfect to make her waist look much smaller. Tonks knew her fashion - that much was sure.

"These trousers are awesome, Honey," Margret gushed at the tightly stretched fabric.

Harry had to agree. "If I didn't know she used sizing charms, I'd wonder how someone would get into these pants," he said. He deeply rued that comment a few moments later, when Tonks stated something in a matter of fact voice, while nipping on her tea.

"You know, the usual way starts with buying her a drink, hon."

The rest of the lunch, which turned out to be a marvellous assortment of seafood, went on without a hitch, and much laughter was shared. Most laughter was shared when Tonks challenged Harry to a fencing duel.

ooOOoo

"I still can't believe you won!" Harry whined while he retrieved his sword from under a canapé. Plucking the safety blunt from the tip and vanishing it wandlessly, he stood and re-sheathed it. "And with a bloody rolled newspaper, to boot!"

"Don't worry, lover-boy; you're not the first I've destroyed in the ring," Tonks tweeted at him. "You overextended yourself in that second lunge, and once I swatted your sword away and stepped into measure, I could do whatever I wanted. Be glad I only slapped your wrist."

"I guess. Where did you learn fencing? Is that part of Auror training?" Harry asked as he passed her on the way to the table.

"No, it's a family thing. The Black's were very traditional in their upbringing, and fencing was one thing every child was trained in. My mother was the family's best fencer, and has trained me well," Tonks smiled at him sweetly, before starting to chuckle. "You know, now that I know about this place, that tradition actually makes sense! I wonder if mom knows about this place; she never said a word."

Harry chuckled at her over his shoulder. "She probably didn't want you to be sad that you'd never see it. You know what's even more amazing? You didn't stumble once!"

"Little blighter!" Tonks huffed and cuffed him across the head with the paper, eliciting a satisfactorily painful yelp from him. "If you were playing nice, I would have extended an offer to show you a bit, but if you are such a sod and sore loser..." she trailed off playfully.

It took only a few seconds of Harry grovelling on his knees and praising her cat-like grace under the laughter of all those present for her to relent and agree to some fencing lessons. She helped Harry up from the floor and both went back to the table. Right then, her

clumsiness returned with compound interest and caused her to stumble over the rug. Arms flailing wildly, she went down and landed flat on her face, hard.

"Oh, bugger me!" she moaned into the carpet.

At this, Remus jumped up and blindly rushed to help her up, which prompted Margret to shout a warning.

"Careful, Remus - you might hurt her!"

It goes without saying that sensible conversation was impossible for quite a while after that rather ambiguous comment.

AN:

"And this is from the human shield subgroup," embirsiphonelilathia said as she lifted a huge gift basket onto the bedside table with the help of pfeil.

"Wow!" said DerLaCroix, as he noticed the caviar and champagne in it. "I didn't know we pay them that well!"

"Oh, we don't, barely a pittance," pfeil replied. "It's only, since you are here in the hospital instead of the base, their numbers have swelled exponentially, and they put together," he explained.

Embirsiphonelilathia nodded gravely. Since the Dark Lord Cliffy had hurt himself trying to do a Futterwacken and wasn't around to 'motivate' his men, she hadn't had to fill out termination papers, once. The grinder already showed signs of flash rust.

"Yeah, but honestly - if the population gets to be too much I'm going to have to put my foot down and start filling out termination papers, anyway - because honestly, the warehouse where they're kept can only fit so many inside of it."

ooOOoo

Again, thanks to pfeil and embirsiphonelilathia.

Singled out minions:

Darth Drafter - You managed to draw my attention. Whether this will bode well for you, I'm still undecided. *cue ominous music*

Marriann - you might want to read up about privateers - the hundreds of merchants who got letters of marque and legally captured ships of nations their nation was at war with. They were perfectly good, patriotic men of their time, with family and kids at home.

BJH - Thank you, that was very disturbing...

Pointer - Wine is about three times as alcoholic as beer - six times, if american beer... *doges thrown bottles*

noyli - in my opinion, there is a difference between being dark and incompetent. Dumbledore has only the best intentions, this makes him light - he just has a stupid habit to put the collective over the individual whenever necessary, and likes reforming too much.

Sorry if I sound cranky, but I'm in the middle of a legal fight to keep my 20 acre ranch from getting claimed as a natural reserve under the title of imminent domain, and on top of that my internet connection took a few days off and left for vacation without notice.

Chapter 13: Shape up, 'yer landlubber!

*** August 9th, the Villa's gardens, late afternoon. ***

"Prime –Seconde – Tierce – NO! Harry, the other way!" Tonks yelled as she put Harry through the paces with his sword. Hermione had asked to join that session, and was given a conjured smallsword with a colichemarde blade, after a short assessment by Tonks.

She argued that since precision, not strength, were Hermione's forte, she didn't need a cutting edge for chopping. And the ten inch shorter blade was much easier to wield for a girl of her proportions. Despite the fact the shape of the blade was odd Hermione quickly fell in love with the weapon and its astounding grace. Though she knew she would have to learn to wield it carefully to make full use of the weapon, as the lower third of the blade looked like a normal sword, but then it lost half its width in a 'shoulder' and then tapered off to a sharp point at the end. The 'forte', as the broader part was called, would be used for parries, and the rest - more or less a slim poker with a fine point, sharpened at the last four inches - was used for lightning-quick attacks. It would be a challenge but then again she always loved those.

And to prove Tonks right, Hermione had caught up on the parry drill within seconds, while Harry still had problems remembering the correct sequence. Not that he was that bad in execution, anyone who had learned to wield a wand could do reasonably well in fencing with some practice, but unlike Hermione, he always was sloppy with correct positions.

When both started complaining about their arms being tired, Tonks made them switch weapon hand. After all, you never knew if you had to use your sword as primary weapon or to support magical combat.

Tonks kept them busy until early evening, which meant that their arms felt sore enough to fall off at a moment's notice, but at least they now had the eight parries just about right. Under clinical training conditions, at least. Tonks told them that they might be reasonable fencers in a year or so if they didn't slack off like the lazy bums they were.

Hermione was fit to strangle her for that comment, now if she only could raise her hands...

ooOOoo

After a reciprocal back and shoulder rub and a reasonably good night of tired cuddling only - Hermione once more was considering a gruesome death for their teacher for that reason - in the Villa's Master bedroom, both were refreshed enough to start the new day. They stayed in the villa, since neither would be able to climb up a boarding ladder today, nor would Harry be able to row them over to the Revenge.

Both teens were looking forward to the day ahead, the main reason being they got to skip training that day. They were only supposed to visit a few places and people, the most important visit being the trip to Grimmauld Place and then a short stint to talk to the twins.

Maybe they would finally get to use their beach below the cliff for summertime purposes. Apparently Hermione's parents had already gotten around to doing so while the kids were put through the grinder by Tonks - a fact that made Hermione's hands once again flinch at the imagined throat of her instructor. The only thing that stopped them from doing so as well after training was that Matty had warned them not to enter the water at night, because apparently sharks would assemble in the bay during that time. During dinner, Remus and Hermione had come to an agreement to try warding the small inlet against them, which was highly appreciated by Hermione's mum.

Neither Remus, nor Hermione, nor Margret knew that either of them did want to do that because of their secret intentions of a late night skinny-dip with their partner.

Harry had earned himself his first plus points with Hermione today even before breakfast, when he asked her whether they should commission her own sword at Lenny's after they had returned from Britain.

He upped his score later, when he started a discussion about warding one large room against the heat and humidity, so they could transfer the Black library to the island. Hermione nearly forgot that they had company that morning when he mentioned it during

breakfast. After having expressed her gratefulness adequately - for now, she immediately started to confer with Remus about the move and whether to move the books in bulk or by criteria.

Their plans for the day were interrupted when Lenny turned up at the Villa with a request for a test run of a wand prototype.

They went out into the lush jungle behind the Villa and quickly found a suitable large tree stump from a toppled tree. Being satisfied with the test area, Lenny rummaged in his bag, and then proudly showed them the wand. Or at least what he meant to be one.

It was a crude piece of bent wood, with a rich, dark honey colour. It was about one and a half inches in diameter and had a sharp bend about one third of the way from the handle end.

Lenny noticed the questioning look Harry gave his work and commented accordingly. "Don't worry, this is only a crude shape, I didn't want to spend hours fancying up a useless piece of wood. That's why I want a test run. I lack the juice to make this baby work," he said with a broad smile lightening up his face

"Oh great, I was afraid that this was the final shape," Harry laughed in relief as he eyed the thick, crude wand over.

"What is this wand made of?" asked Hermione, while giving the wand-shaped object a very thorough visual examination. "I've never seen such a design before. Looks like a pistol without barrel. Did you do this to aid aiming?"

"Well, while it really worked out that way and I would like to take credit for this innovation, the sad truth is that I needed some seasoned wood. You see, because of the foci to be included, my wandwood stock didn't fit," Lenny chuckled in his deep voice.

"So I went through my piles of wood for other purposes. Sadly, all my straight wood of acceptable size, the material destined for gun shafts, consisted of walnut, a wood notoriously prone to fail as wandwood," the man remarked as a side comment.

Hermione gave him a critical eye at this statement. She considered it heresy to point something out without explaining the reasons

behind. Not knowing her 'you better tell me why, NOW!' look, Lenny obliviously continued.

"At first, I was devastated, but then I did the obvious. Since a pistol is hand-held, too, I went through that stock and finally settled for that piece, which was the only one long enough to contain the length of the core materials we chose. Let me tell you, it was hell to split it properly and bed the cores. That's why I wanted to have a test run before I invest all the work to finish it up properly," Lenny concluded.

"I beg your pardon, I thought you said cores? As in plural, multiple? I didn't think that was possible," Remus quipped. Margret and Henry started looking intrigued, as this was proving to be even more interesting than they thought.

"Not impossible, just highly unusual. You see, most wizards or witches aren't even taxing their single cores. Only a very powerful person would be limited by a single core," Lenny waved the question off.

"And how many cores did you use for this wand?" Tonks asked.

"Four."

"Four? Why in Merlin's name did you use that many?" she screeched in shock, some parrots joining in as they vacated the trees surrounding the clearing.

"Well, it began with a theory. I thought that if I were to combine different kinds of foci in a wand, they would share the load. And since in Magic one and one usually equals to more than two, any number of cores should be able to handle a more than their number times the magic of a single core," Lenny started talking, waving his hands around while he explained his theory.

"You refer to the Rockford law?" Remus inquired. Hermione and Lenny nodded immediately, while Harry and Tonks shared a blank look and a shrug. They were clearly out of their league. Henry didn't even attempt to make sense of this and chose to watch in silence, while Margret proved Hermione's parentage by listening closely, soaking up the information, although it was of no use for her.

"Since I had four working cores left, I decided against being cheap and for using all of them. But that left me with the problem of wood compatibility. Since I had four different kinds of foci, each with affinities to special kinds of wood, it was impossible to find a perfect fit."

"Sounds complicated, why not simply use four of the same kind?" Harry outed himself as complete layman. Henry was glad that Harry shouldered the blame for a question he would have uttered a second later too, as Hermione took it on herself to educate her boyfriend.

"Because Rockford's law states that multiple foci of the same kind do block each other while different materials amplify their usefulness."

"Yes, Miss, that is correct. So, since a perfect wood would be impossible, I took a risk and ignored it," Lenny conceded.

"I assumed that the interaction of the various foci would generate enough of a magical field to overcome the resistance of a less than perfect wood. The only question was what kind of wood I should use. I finally settled for Black Locust, a very easy to work wood which is very durable and hard to set on fire, which I thought important, given your special problem. It didn't hurt that I had lots of it in storage."

Having said all that was worth saying, Lenny then pointed at the massive, still standing trunk of the toppled tree in the distance. "So, if you allow, I think we should commence testing."

ooOOoo

"Holy mother of FUCK!" A yell was ringing across the clearing, not scaring any wildlife, for the simple reason that everything living had already moved the hell out of there.

"Language, Tonks!" Remus scolded his girlfriend off-handedly. "And just for the protocol, I agree!" He added as he tried to blink the spots from his vision. The Grangers were standing a bit away, with their mouths wide open, their ears ringing, and utterly speechless.

Even Hermione was standing motionless, as was Harry, both blinking wildly at the sight of the watermelon sized hole in the six feet diameter tree stump they had used for target practice.

In prior testing, Harry was able to hold his Patronus practically indefinitely without any noticeable heat-up occurring, but then Lenny wanted to test the maximal power Harry could push through the wand in one concentrated blast.

A regular reducto, as provided by Hermione, Remus, and Tonks as benchmark, while excellent to blast objects into pieces or bring down walls, should only have managed to create a fist-deep indentation in that tough hardwood timber. Harry was able to do about half again as much damage with his normal Osage wand, while his wandless blast was more like a children's fist.

But with the use of Lenny's customized wand, Harry had not only bored a three feet deep, over one foot wide hole into the tree. Also, the whole back half had splintered away, leaving a wide funnel at the other side.

Henry once more came to the conclusion to not meddle in the kids' relationship. In accordance to his own prediction a few weeks ago, Harry could in fact smite him where he stood.

While Harry was alternating looking at the tree and his wand in his still outstretched arm, Hermione shuddered at the thought what carnage a blasting hex or bone-breaker would cause with that wand.

"Did you just see that?" Harry asked his teachers, while slowly turning around to face them.

"Will you stop pointing that THING at us!" Tonks shrieked and jumped aside as his wand came to point in their general direction due to Harry's movement. Remus kept quiet, but even he had to fight the urge to get the hell out of the way of wherever that wand was aimed at.

Lenny was clapping his hands, proudly. He already knew that his wand worked for Harry, but these results were amazing.

"Very well, now that I know the wand will work, let me take it back to the shop to finish it. Give me another day or two, and it will be all

done," he said, gently taking the bent piece of wood from Harry, and left the stunned group to fend for themselves, whistling a song and walking with a spring in his step as he navigated his way through the now deserted flowery jungle back to the villa, and to town.

*** Grimmauld place #12, 9 am local time. ***

"Master Harry!" The elf's war cry echoed through the study before Harry's sight had stopped spinning. It had taken the elf only a blink's time to arrive at the study where the portkey had dumped the group.

"Hello Dobby. Are you well?" Harry replied as soon as he had recovered his bearings.

Naturally, this lead to a lengthy proclamation of Harry being "The Bestest," because of him caring for a lowly servant like Dobby. This, while already nearly a normal occurrence for Harry, amused the adults of their group to no end, still. While Harry silently cursed the necessary decision to take everyone back - since he was the only one able to operate the portkey - Hermione left Harry to fend with Dobby and called for Winky.

"Master Harry's Grangy, Miss has called?" Winky replied dutifully upon arriving; only wrinkling her ears slightly at the sight of Dobby doing his improper antics, again.

Suppressing the urge to shudder at this honorific - at least the elves thought it to be one - Hermione asked the question Harry won't be able to ask for a while longer, as he still was consoling the weeping Dobby.

"Did anything of interest happen while we were away?"

"Only the Double Ginger Mischief Makers being calling a lot over the Floo, but Winky only did tell them that you is being away. Winky is not being telling Master's secrets, Winky is a good elf!" the small elf told her, prompting Hermione to tell her that she indeed was a very good elf, lest they had two crying elves to console.

"I have one question for both of you, Dobby and Winky. Can you pop over to the Black island?" Harry asked, having calmed Dobby down to only occasional snuffles.

"Winky is being sorry, Master, but we be knowing that island is over the ocean. Elves do only being able to pop a few hundred miles per pop. We is having no place to stop in between," Winky replied, and both elves were looking very contrite about having to disappoint their master. Their hanging ears and huge eyes gave them a very sad puppy-like look.

"No problem, I only asked. But you can travel by portkey, can't you?" Harry asked, and received a positive reply by both elves. "Ok, that settled, does anyone of you know how to make a room in a humid climate suitable for a library?"

Dobby was jumping up and down in joy at this request, causing the adults in the background to finally lose it over the elf's antics. "Dobby is being caring for Malfoy library a lot. Dobby knows what to do. Is island being as wet as Wiltshire?" the small creature continued eagerly, either not noticing, or ignoring the reaction of his Master's friends.

Harry was looking around, lost for an answer. Hermione and the Grangers shrugged, not being accustomed with that area. Remus came to his aid. "Yes, about as humid, but it has at 20 to 40 degrees all year round," he said while wiping a tear of mirth from his eye.

Dobby nodded enthusiastic at that news. "Dobby can do, Master Harry, Sir."

Harry ignored a squeal, suppressed to near silence, from Hermione at the last obstacle to moving the library being cleared, as he walked towards the Floo. He knew she already pondered which book to read first, down at the beach.

While Hermione went to look for Crookshanks - who probably would be in the attic, catching rodents - Harry went to Floo the 'Double Ginger Mischief Makers'.

"Weasley's Wizard Wheezes!" he called out while throwing a pinch of powder into the fireplace. As soon as the flames turned green, he dropped to his knees and stuck his head in, secure in the knowledge that a Floo projection can't be jinxed. 'Although if it could,' he thought, 'the twins would be the ones to find out how to do that'.

"Harry! Where the hell have you been?" Was the instant response by one of the twins as his vision stopped spinning and the cluttered back office of the shop came into view. Harry couldn't say exactly which one, especially because the twin in question was wearing a horrible lime-green jacket, probably extremely expensive by the sheer ugliness of it, and horribly crashing with his red hair and the purple pants.

"Here, there, an island in the Caribbean..." Harry joked, savouring the annoyed expression of the twin before being shouted at.

"Wait a moment, Harry, you went to the Caribbean and didn't tell me or Gred?" While grinning like a maniac, Harry filed away the fact that he was probably talking to Fred, or Forge, like he called himself since Harry's second year or thereabouts.

"Gred! Come back here this instant and help me yell at our investor!" Fred yelled out of the door. A few seconds later the second twin entered, dressed exactly the same. "If only they were to share two pairs of suits, like Dobby does with his socks, then there would be a way to tell them apart," Harry thought.

"Harry? Where the hell have you been?" George asked him, giving Harry the usual feeling of déjà-vu everyone now and then has around the twins. Sometimes it was amazing how they managed to always say exactly the same things.

"He's been cavorting around on a Caribbean island while we were working our asses off," Fred answered. Harry didn't like the way they turned and were glaring at him. Not. At. All.

"You see, I found out about that island and after checking if it is inhabitable, I called you to officially invite you two over, but since I now fear to be the recipient of an all-out prank war, I don't think it's a good idea any longer," Harry began evasively backing off, but was of course interrupted by them.

"Harry, mate, you got us completely wrong," Fred purred in a low voice, which made Harry a bit uncomfortable when George continued in the same manner.

"We would never, ever do something so reprehensible,"

"So vile and evil, "

"To our distinguished investor,"

"Our adopted brother,"

"And overall best friend out of our year."

Harry thought the overall performance to be quite nice and nearly believable, only the halos around their heads were a bit over the top.

"Well, I'll show mercy this time, and will even hand you an olive branch and grant you both entry to Grimmauld Place. Can you get some hired help and be over in an hour or so to talk?" Harry played along, and received their counter-timed double nod, again. It was even faster than last time, showing that they actually practiced that move. Shaking his head, Harry bade goodbye and withdrew from the Floo.

After Harry had added the twins to the wards - under protest from Remus and Tonks - Harry instructed the elves to start packing the library into trunks for transfer. Hermione of course, but unnecessarily, reminded the elves to correctly seal the trunks to protect the books until the new library room would be prepared. She then decided to better supervise the elves and rushed to the Library after they had popped away. Harry just chuckled silently at his girl. He knew she loved her books nearly as much as him. Ok, he at least hoped that he came before the books, but he wouldn't try her and was rather glad of what he had right now. No need to make things even more complicated, right?

By the time they had packed all their things from their rooms and fetched the Granger's trunks containing their household, the elves - with occasional help by Remus when they noticed a book to be cursed - were a good quarter into the library. There were already ten transfigured trunks standing around, full to the brim with shrunken tomes. While Hermione painstakingly checked the sealant charms, the others retired to the drawing room, waiting for the twins to complete the task Harry had begun.

Ten minutes later, the sounds of Floo arrival were heard, twice, and then voices and the squeak of an elf talking. A moment later, the door flew open and the twins strode in. Most eyes in the room

immediately started to water when the multi-coloured floral print shirts, left unbuttoned to leave some hairless, pale skin visible came into view. The colour-changing shorts completed the outfit and bared a lot of spindly, pale leg to the public. Harry briefly thanked the gods that at least they didn't do the sunglass, hat and white nose combo that Aunt Petunia did whenever she went into the garden in summer.

"We're ready! Let's move!" They proclaimed in unison.

"You know I asked you over to talk, don't you?" Harry carefully asked.

"Island now, talk later," one twin said, the other nodding fervently, grinning from ear to ear.

"We have thrown a week's worth of clothes into our trunks and got some employees to work under Lee,"

"Who is now managing the place while we are ready to permanently retire to an island,"

"Concentrating on research and innovation,"

"In a more inspirational environment!" They finished, beaming at the audience, who were collectively glaring at Harry, who was currently hitting his head against the table, repeatedly.

With a sigh, Harry faced the unavoidable. "One condition - you will behave with the islanders," he said.

Remus had other plans. "Come on, Harry. You know how boring island life can be. Let them bring some entertainment into the town. You know that the people would appreciate it," he said, causing everyone to smile, most because of being 'in the know', and two because of not being.

"At least they won't have problems with the dress code, I presume," Margret gave the final comment before the exodus, mark two, began.

About half an hour later, everyone including the elves and ten lightened trunks of various stuff and books were portkeyed half across the world. While the elves started to prepare the new library, which Hermione wanted to supervise, they all quickly changed into

their now customary clothes. Hermione was the quickest by far, since wearing fewer articles than anyone else, much to Harry's pleasure. As she passed them by, the twins were eyeing her approvingly, which led Remus and Tonks to take them aside, telling them the law of the lands. Harry smirked amused as he overheard the words 'broadside' and 'keelhauling' in that hushed speech across the room, while he was sliding his rapier sash over his shoulder.

Soon they convened in the bigger sitting room, which was held in a mint green and had space for about ten people to sit and chat at leisure.

Of course, the twins had opted for those horrid red-white ringed tights, under brown knee-length trousers. A garish coloured hotchpotch of shirts, vests, sashes and a tricorne, each, was completing their outfits. One of them had a huge gold hoop, probably via sticking charm, dangling from his left ear, the other one from the right. They looked like, well, like having spent like a sailor in a clothes shop.

"In case you noticed," Tonks told them, "the hoops are to tell them apart. Whoever wears the earring at the right side is Fred, no matter which one it is. If they wear them at the same side, they will be keelhaunted, end of story. I, for one, am fed up with not knowing who is who."

"This place is cool, Harry!" the twins chorused, and then only - 'one moment; hoop at the right side, that's his left ear, so it's George,' Harry deducted - continued. "Now do you always wear that stuff here?"

Henry answered before Harry managed. "Well until now, we have, since these clothes are very appropriate for this climate, and we only packed for an overnight, so they came convenient; but we only have to wear them when on board or in town. In the Villa - that's this building - or down on the Skull Beach, we usually wear normal clothes. The villagers always wear them."

One of the twins had a question. It was Fred, according to the hoop. "What do you mean with 'on board'? Remus mentioned keelhaunting, so there is a ship?"

"Yes, two actually," Margret explained, "the Pathfinder belongs to the town, while the Revenge is Harry's personal vessel."

"Cool, your own yacht? Tell, how big is it?" Fred addressed Harry in his seat across the room, who answered with a sly smile, while buffing his nails. "Oh, not that big, only about 150 feet, and 48 guns..."

Laughter ensued when the twins threw themselves at his feet bowing and canting that they were unworthy, over and over again.

ooOOoo

"Oh, get up, you are worthy! Ok, now that you are here, would you be so kind to tell us what you wanted to tell us so badly," Harry said when they finally had ended their antics.

"Well, actually," Fred said, letting himself drop onto the couch.

"we..." George continued, while falling into place next to his brother.

"STOP!" Harry yelled as he jumped up and stomped over to them. "Just one of you talks, the other one stays silent. I don't need another headache. So, can you do this?" He said, fingering his sword as he squinted at them.

"You are no fun, Harry, we expected more from a man with a really big gun," Fred lamented.

"Yes, entirely too touchy for a man with so much wood," George agreed, much to the amusement of the people sitting with them, minus Harry.

"We get it! We get it!" Harry groaned, his face turning a vibrant shade of red. "Now would you please come to the point?"

"But we haven't even commented on the size of your mast," Fred grumbled and held his hands up in a protective gesture when Harry moved forward with his hand on the hilt of his blade, ready to draw.

"Actually, we wanted to find out where you had gone, and warn you, since Dumbledore knew that you were gone within minutes," Fred quickly changed the topic as if were his intention all the time.

"He had?" Henry asked, surprised at the news.

"Yes, he had an emergency meeting by nine o'clock on the eighth. He told us that you had left an hour ago. Had everyone running up and down the country looking for you; he was completely up in arms because he couldn't find you anywhere," Fred reported on his own as demanded, while George resorted to sign language and expressive dance to complete the experience. Harry grumbled, but he had only told him to keep silent, so he could only blame himself.

"But how could he know that?" Henry asked curiously, only to get his answer from everyone around him at once.

"Moody" and "Mad-eye" echoed through the room. Everybody magical knew that only that man could be the reason.

Fred nodded, while George assumed a champion pose.

"That walking scar tissue guy? Why him?" Henry asked. He remembered that man with his peg leg well. Everybody would remember a man like Moody.

"You remember his eye - that electric blue one? He can see through everything with it," Tonks told him. While Henry nodded at that, Margret flinched and wrinkled her face in disgust.

"So when he was talking to me, he was probably peeping beneath my clothes?" she said, making Hermione flinch, too. She never had thought that Moody might do that. She turned to face Tonks, who had worked a lot with Moody and had to know.

Tonks ruefully shook her head. "You know, you learn to ignore that over time. I know for fact that he scans everyone he sees through all layers to find hidden weapons. So he certainly has," she said, and ignored the disgusted faces all around, especially from the twins. "But he checks so many people at once that his eye barely stays long enough to notice much detail. And he has grown so accustomed to it that he doesn't even register it anymore. He once told me that it would distract him if he would care for what he sees, and he could never let that happen," she told them, which made all the kids yell "Constant vigilance!" in unison.

"Ok, that means the cat is out of the bag," Remus began, smiling faintly. "But at the other hand, it is great for us that he knows."

Harry and the twins gave him a baffled look and the Grangers looked like deep in thought. Hermione looked intrigued, and Tonks smiled knowingly.

Before anyone else could reach a conclusion, Harry already asked for it. "Why exactly?"

"Oh cub, don't be so dense! He now knows that you can leave and disappear to somewhere completely out of his reach. And he needs you. That leaves us in a very good position if we ever need to talk to him."

"Whatever," said, Harry, slapping his thighs with both hands. "Sounds great, but I had some plans for today, and those include a beach, my girlfriend, and a very small bikini suit on her. So, I don't know about you, but I want to get into the ocean before the sharks assemble."

His proposition not meeting any opposition, they all went to change into beachwear and soon assembled in the foyer. They went down the path leading down the cliff to Skull Beach, and it was very hard to keep the twins from storming down and maybe injuring themselves as they saw the ship out on the water.

While the adults were using the time to tan themselves on loungers Tonks transfigured from some seashells and chatting about this and that, Harry and Hermione used the opportunity to frolic in the waves and the deeper water, just being teenagers in love for once.

All this time, the twins were just standing chest-deep in the water, grinning at the Revenge in a most disturbing manner.

ooOOoo

As the group returned from their swim, everyone went to change and agreed to meet in the sitting room. When Harry returned, he went straight to the bar and poured himself some fruit juice.

Turning around, he yelped and dropped the glass, already half way into casting a spell before he stopped himself. Out of nowhere, the

twins were standing before him, probably having apparated in right as he turned around. Deep inside, Harry was sure that they didn't make a popping, but more a 'sproing' sound when doing so, like the spring of a jack-in-the-box. He seriously could imagine them like that.

Both were looking at him with puppy eyes. He took a calming breath and asked them what they wanted.

*** Later that evening, the Villa, Master bedroom ***

"I can't believe you really allowed them that!" Hermione railed as she renewed the silencing charm on the window for the tenth time or so. "They are going on for hours already! Couldn't you at least take the charm off?"

"No, that charm is integrated in the guns, and silencing doesn't work on them," Harry sighed.

"Matty said even if you managed to remove the cannon blast charm runes from the gun without destroying it, the sound they make without is nearly as loud, but at least twice as annoying, like Styrofoam was being rubbed or a nail on a blackboard, depending on the shot. It took a cannon blast charm to mask it with something you could live with. I'll go and talk to them, alright? Or maybe Remus or Tonks know a good sound barrier shield."

"Do this - I'll try to make sense of this warding book here. I want this shark repellent ward be done as soon as possible," Hermione smiled, and again bowed over her book, trying to make sense of the Runes and Arithmacy involved.

ooOOoo

AN:

"Hmmm, that's not right either," DerLaCroix huffed as he threw another crumpled piece of paper in the direction of the wastebasket, missing because of the heap of balled up papers it was already overflowing with.

Tentatively, embirsiphonelilathia stepped closer to hand over today's reports on the Greek hostile takeover in progress. "What are you

doing, boss?" she asked as she saw the various drawings of costumes scattered all over the desk.

"I'm working on a secret persona to get some fun occasionally," he huffed, shifting papers in search for one in particular. "This one is the best I came up with," he said.

Embi raised an eyebrow at the picture, which showed someone in a red/green Hussar's uniform, wearing what looked like a Venetian mask.

"Very dashing," she commented. "Do you have a proper name lined up already?"

"Dunno," DerLaCroix sighed. "For some reason, all I came up with was Gary Stu..."

ooOOoo

I am sore from putting up fences all weekend, and have sunburn all over my back. I had to get up early to repair the corral, noticing I haven't got the right material anymore and have to improvise. I then tried to have breakfast when my cat ate too fast, again, and got sick all over the carpet. I cleaned that up and then drove two hours to work. Tonight, I'll have to put in more fencing before sundown, while being eaten alive by various bugs.

Happy birthday, me...

PS: All negative repliers will be summarily shot.

ooOOoo

Many thanks to my trusted betas pfeil and she-who-causes-cramps-when-typing-her-name. Without them, my stories would only be half as bad as the minions would deserve to.

Historical info (as it was mentioned)

A British navy ship usually held 5-15% pressed sailors, in some instances (e.g. after battles) this could skyrocket to 30-40%.

Turnover averaged at 52%, which means that Joe Sailor was released (usually when not able to work anymore due to crippling injuries), died or deserted within two years. Desertion was 4-30% depending on ship's size, showing an about same numerical number of desertions on all ships - 30 per stay in harbour - with the same amount of men pressed each stay. This means it was very dangerous to visit the harbour area as a young man (85 % of sailors were between 16 and 25). At the other hand, most pressed sailors escaped within a year (80%). But that meant that they were somewhere, with no job, and no realistic chance to get back to their home town. If they managed to get back after two or three years (the earliest realistic time-frame), their wives probably already had remarried in order not to starve, and their business/job was gone, so most probably didn't even bother.

Chapter 14: Storm ahead!

Over the next few days, things changed.

The most notable being, Tonks' knowledge of a Barrier spell. After she taught them Harry had managed to cast it well enough that the sound of a cannon was muffled to a small pop at the beach and could scarcely be heard up at the villa.

The Twins weren't slacking off either, they had actually practiced with the guns. Though the initial feeling of their friends and the crew was wary suspicion they quickly proved that they could be serious about anything involving explosions. The conjured up bright red balls for targets, charmed them to swim off at a certain distance and released them into the water before proceeding to shoot every last one of them.

And since guns were things that made noise and made other things go boom, the twins not only fell in love with them, but were practically born to use them. They even tried to figure out the runic enchantments to make one for themselves, for their lab they had started constructing over at an unused beach at the islands eastern side, which Harry assigned them.

Harry and Hermione continued their training with magic and swordplay, soon though their night began to include studying a sizable part of the Black Library that Dobby had been able to set up within a few days. They had to return to Grimmauld place twice more, fetching a total of 12 trunks full of 'reasonably safe' books shrunk to paperback size. These trips netted them a respectable stack of knowledge to have on hand. Most of the books concentrated on the different areas of spell work, though there was still many left at Grimmauld that focused on the darker side of magic. Those books wouldn't be touched until Remus could go through them and check thoroughly for curses and other nasty traps.

ooOOoo

With a flick of his finger, a red wedge of magical energy impacted on the piece of wood, cleaving it in two, with one half falling off. Harry quickly flicked his finger again, turning the half that was still standing on the block ninety degrees before cutting it again. Then he took a

sip from the butterbeer next to his seat and levitated the other half onto the cutting block.

"You know..." Henry's voice sounded from behind him, making the boy jump slightly. "When I heard that you were out to chop wood for tonight's bonfire, I thought I should go out and help you with the hard work. I definitely didn't expect this..."

Harry had the decency to blush in his recliner. "Honestly, I tried! I volunteered to do it so the elves could concentrate on the food, and thought I could lose myself in the work and thought, but it didn't work. The axe only got stuck," he told the man closing in on him in a near whine that made Henry shake his head in mirth. The boy still had huge problems dealing with people he had respect for. Henry liked the fact that Harry did show him respect as Hermione's father, but he felt it was time to try getting a better relation started between them. In his opinion, working together was the best way to bond, and this was the only kind of work he could help the boy with.

"Maybe it was too small," Henry admitted as supportive as possible. That was the usual problem with people, trying to cop down trees with a kitchen hatchet.

"Well, I copied the biggest axe I ever saw," Harry told him, with a quick point in the direction of the axe.

Henry shot a quick glance in the direction of the axe leaning on the pile of wood and gave a snort. Harry had obviously tended to the other far end of the spectrum.

"Harry, this axe would be fine in Conan's hands, but not for chopping wood," he laughed as he pointed at the double-bladed battleaxe. "You need a thicker axe-head to split the wood," he told the highly embarrassed teenager.

"What would that look like?" Harry asked, and Henry drew a shape into the ground with some wood splinters, explaining the design to Harry, who listened intently to the man. Thirty seconds later, Harry had the tool transfigured from his old axe, and gotten the design approved by Henry.

While Harry made a few test swings, Henry walked over to the pile of wood and placed the first piece onto the block. With a big

overhead swing, Harry cleanly bisected the wood, both halves falling off the block. Henry immediately placed another on it, before picking up one of the halves.

"Wow, that's much better," Harry said with a smile as he now could work his surplus energy off. "Too bad the Dursleys only had an electric fireplace. I wouldn't have minded this for a chore!" he laughed, while Henry placed another log on the block and shook his head at the heresy of an electric fireplace.

"What exactly did you want to think about? I've noticed you've looked lost lately, more sad than anything," Henry asked as Harry again had sent the halves flying, putting one of the prior split halves on the block.

Harry frowned and paused mid-swing, before swinging so hard that the axe got firmly stuck in the block. When Henry quirked an eyebrow, Harry wrenched the axe out and gave a sigh. "I had a talk with the twins. They told me that Voldemort is supposedly back to his old, nasty self," he said and sent another log flying in two directions. Henry decided to let him talk and just replaced the logs as quickly as the boy hit them.

"His Death Eaters are roaming the country again, and while they haven't done much to the wizarding public, yet," Harry huffed as the axe dropped with considerably more force than before, "the Order is well aware that they are killing Muggles again," he said through clenched teeth as he pulled and pushed to pry his tool loose.

Henry nodded gravely, and gave the axe-handle a shove to help Harry. When Harry stepped back and got ready again, Henry picked up a log, but held onto it instead of placing it on the block right away. He turned it in his hand with a few light tosses as he brought his thoughts into order. "Let me guess, you feel like you should go there and do something instead of sitting here and hiding, don't you?"

Harry lowered the axe and leaned on it. "Of course - I'm the only one that can stop this monster, and I'm hiding on an island instead of fighting him. There are people dying in Britain, and I'm sitting here and doing nothing, instead of going back and start working on bringing him down."

Henry weighted the log in his hands for another long moment before raising his head and looking Harry straight in the eyes. "Aren't you are a bit harsh on yourself? You're not exactly dragging your feet, and doing nothing but tanning and dancing the night away, Harry - you study most of the day, and I know you can already duel Tonks to a tie."

"That stuff you both do while fighting looks amazing, by the way," he added with a smile as he noted the boy blush lightly under the praise.

"Still, ask yourself, even with your new power, what chance would you give yourself to win? Fifty-fifty?" he dug deeper, watching the boy carefully.

"Or even less?" Henry asked as he noticed Harry looking down at the mention of the odds. As Harry sighed sadly, Henry set the log down on the block and reached out to grab Harry's shoulder.

"Son, I know how hard this is on you, but right now, the only thing you can do is to learn as much as you can so you are ready to face him one day. Just be patient," he said and stepped back, indicating Harry to continue chopping. Harry gave him a thoughtful nod, and soon they fell into a comfortable rhythm, chipping the wood in silence.

ooOOoo

The next morning, they got a Toucan from Lenny. Harry remembered the strange bird that brought him the post from Sirius - after all, owls weren't native to the Caribbean. Lenny's note sounded excited, he would like them to come over, at once, because he had a proposition for Harry. After a short discussion, all agreed to go together, since they were curious. Especially the twins were; they missed the first demonstration of Harry's 'battlewand' and had only heard about it second-hand.

After everyone was dressed and the twins were nearly oath-bound to behave, the group departed down to the village. At the workshop, they found a locked door, and only after hard knocking and yelling, Lenny opened and rapidly ushered them in. As soon as they were in, he locked the door and picked up a heavy looking iron bar, which he placed across the doors, barricading them. He then inserted a huge, rune-covered padlock into some massive loops in the bar and the

doors, locking them. Hermione and Harry exchanged some meaningful looks as the padlock started glowing violet, the glow expanding to the bar and then to the doors.

As he started to activate some rune clusters on the wall and hinges, which Harry could at least identify as Norse by now, people started to get nervous. Except for Remus, who had to keep an eye on the twins who were standing dangerously close to the hearth and the fires, and thus had missed most of Lenny's strange behaviour.

Finally, Lenny had powered all the wards on the door and turned towards them.

"Hello, I'm sorry if I seem a bit paranoid, but what I have done is so revolutionary that I don't want anybody to hear about it."

Everybody nodded, as that made sense, in a way. Giving the door another wary glance, Lenny went to the counter and rummaged a bit under it. He started tapping patterns of the wooden mosaic on a drawer of his desk with his wand, and a quiet tune started playing. As Lenny tapped a few more patterns on the wooden inlays, a bell started sounding, seemingly somewhere in the distance. This made Lenny tap the inlays in a frantic way, until finally, the bell and music ceased with an amazingly loud click, and a very relieved looking Lenny reached into a compartment and fetched a box, of which everybody assumed that it contained the finished wand.

Their surprise was great when Lenny opened it and revealed a muzzle-loader handgun. It was a fantastic piece of work, with an octagonal brass barrel, a fine carved flint lock and silver inlays all over.

Everybody was examining the gun when Hermione gasped. "These inlays! These are runes!" she said, bending over to have a closer look.

Harry also took a closer look and had to agree. Those fine lines formed various runes, along the barrel, the lock and all over the gun. "What are those for?" he asked, awed at the sight of fine workmanship. Remus would have liked to study those as well, but he was stuck watching the twins, who had turned to look at the shelves of guns for themselves, after no wand was presented, yet.

"These look like a warding of some sort, like an impervious rune cluster, but there is some difference I can't read properly - they're too small," Hermione prompted as she examined the lock and pan, her nose nearly touching the gun as she tried to decipher the tiny symbols.

"They are something I have come up with over the years. These are to protect the powder chamber and the charge from water, and guarantee it to only be ignited by the spark of the lock," Lenny proudly admitted.

"So this really uses powder?" Henry asked. "I would have thought that it would work with magic, like those guns!"

Lenny looked at him disbelieving. "It would be impossible to enchant a wand that way. These small rune additions are the most you can do. Those and the featherlight runes to make this wand only twice as heavy as the Captain's other wand," he said in a voice as if Henry just had asked him to teach Flobberworms to fly.

Silence reigned after this statement, as everybody alternated between staring at Lenny and the gun.

"Wait a moment - this is my wand?" Harry gasped as these words finally had fully registered with his mind.

"Wicked!" the twins intoned with broad grins. The mention of this gun actually being a wand had them leave the rack of pistols they were perusing right then and coming over, giving Remus a chance to look at the thing, too.

"Yes, of course," Lenny told him, raising an eyebrow at him. "Why else would I do all this mystery-mongering?"

"But... You made my wand a gun!" Harry blurted, his mind still not grasping the situation entirely.

"Yes!" Lenny cheered. "Can't you see it? It's fantastic - a feature that makes this wand extra dangerous. The form makes targeting very easy, especially if you point-cast, like you do. And when I started to clean up the wood, the idea came to me to mount a gun onto it. It's fantastic. If you are exhausted or need an advantage, you just cock

the gun and pull the trigger, maybe even while casting a spell. There is no shield that can stop a spell and a bullet the same time!"

Tonks nodded approvingly. "That is promising. The form would certainly make a wand better in combat. I would say that I definitely would like to have a normal wand with this kind of grip, if you agree to make me one."

"Me too," Remus added before Tonks could continue. The twins were not far behind.

"But I see a problem with that gun on it. Even with the charm work, it makes the wand heavy and thus slow. And I bet that the metal barrel interferes with spell casting," Tonks insisted after a bit of examination, but without touching the thing. She still was intimidated of it.

"Well, yes. That would be the case," Lenny granted. "I had to use brass to minimize the disturbance. But with this wand, it wasn't much of a concern, since the multiple cores are more than able to counter the metal interference. So maybe that wouldn't be a practical option on a normal wand," he conceded with a slight sigh.

In the background, Fred rose an eyebrow and mouthed the word 'multiple' to his brother, who replied by making a series of rude gestures with his hands, both laughing.

Tonks eyed the wand-gun-chimera closely. "Still, everybody can see the gun barrel, which negates the surprise effect. Can't you disillusion it?"

"Regrettably, no, I can't. It would take a very powerful enchantment to keep working on a wand. Disillusion charms won't hold long."

"How about using a Fidelius?" Hermione asked curiously. Everybody else turned and looked strangely at her for that. "What? You have still enough space on the barrel to carve the runes necessary, and could protect the secret that it looks like a gun, and no one would notice it anymore," she protested the insinuations held in those looks.

Lenny looked at Hermione a little longer, before a smile split his face. "That could work! And if you share the secret, others could use that

secondary feature too, since the wand has nothing to do with it. The secret would probably fail to everyone who sees it fired, but you would certainly have a surprise effect," he babbled on, while Hermione put her hand on her hip and shifted to rest her weight on the other foot in an overly saucy way, tilting her head and smirking at the others in her 'I-told-you-so' manner.

"Why not go even farther?" Margret asked. "You could make it a secret that it looks different from a normal wand. People wouldn't even notice the strange form anymore," she proposed, bringing the light in Lenny's eyes up a few more candelas.

"OK, enough theory. Can anyone here actually cast this charm?" Harry asked eagerly. "No need to discuss this if we can't do it," he stated.

"For something of this size, I can," Remus volunteered after a short moment of consideration, and raised his hands in a protective gesture. "And yes, Hermione, I'll show you how to do it," he added rapidly, anticipating her question.

Harry clapped his hands and smiled. "Then let's try - I'll be the secret keeper, myself."

Five minutes of carving and a very long spell later, the wand looked for the entire world as like a normal wand would; in fact, it didn't have any description other than 'It looks like a normal wand.' Only those in the room knew the secret, for obvious reasons. Harry wanted them to be able to use it in case they needed to, and Lenny was the only one able to service it.

It shouldn't have to be said that Lenny received orders for five more wands with single core and pistol grip. While all the wizards were measured and tested for core materials, Henry and Margret chose pistols for their own self-defence, a long and very well made double-barrel model for Henry and a small hold-out gun for Margret to keep in her bag. Remus took it onto himself to block the twins from procuring guns.

While everyone else was busy testing for cores, and looking for guns, Harry surreptitiously called Dobby and made him fetch Hermione's blade. The transfigured sword was already showing signs of fatigue and would probably reverse form completely in

month or two, and Lenny promised to take the measurements and make a magnificent copy, and of course, to keep it secret. After all, Harry had netted him a few months' worth of income this day. Dobby was tasked to return the blade as soon as Lenny was finished measuring, and to stay unseen until then.

Later that day, Matty found them lunching at the 'A'. Nobody knew the name of the bar anymore, so everybody just called it 'the bar', 'A' or 'Red A', since someone claimed that the writing once was red, many decades ago. Matty had news for him. Basically, it was about growing up and taking over the family business.

ooOOoo

"All hands, ready on braces and sheets! Prepare to tack!" Harry yelled over the deck of the Pathfinder. He was here to learn the ropes, literally, and Matty found it would help him if he would act as First Mate, relaying the orders to the crew.

"You see, Captain Potter-Black - the right way to tack with square sails is to have the sails assist in the turn. So we will brace or back brace those sails in an angle that will push the bow in the desired direction, and then use the rudder to speed up the turn. If we had square sails at the main mast or a full rigged mizzen mast, like the Revenge, we could use them to support that manoeuvre, too," Captain Cobbs, the captain of the Pathfinder, explained Harry patiently, mimicking the sail's position during the manoeuvre with his hands like Ron would show Quidditch moves, while the crew was rushing to their stations, awaiting the next orders.

He then gave the commands for Harry to relay, and when the ship was on its new course, he took his time to explain the timing once more in more detail, since the boat lost a lot of speed during the poor execution.

All in all, Harry didn't do too bad for his first day, and only rarely stumbled over the correct names of all the stuff on board, due to his prior studies of the Hermione Manual, which did include a pirate plot, after all. Hermione had spent her time on board writing in a large notebook, now filled with all the things Harry had been taught during the day, and enjoying the trip with her parents and the other members of their group, all of them eagerly helping and learning to sail, themselves. Even the twins behaved for a while, after being

threatened to get marooned, and eagerly ran from station to station when called out, having a good time on board.

Especially Margret and Henry fell in love with sailing, and were talking about inquiring at the wharf about a small touring boat for two. An early retirement was looking enticing if you had a tropical island to move to.

ooOOoo

But not everything was all orchids on the island.

Three days into their second stay, Harry had noticed Hermione starting to act strange. The first thing that baffled him was when he once saw her in the library, pulling a book from a shelf. She opened it, read a bit and then closed it again, sighing. She then gave the book a caress and put it back, sighing again.

He didn't think too much about it, it was Hermione, after all, and wrote it off as her maybe having kinky thoughts from having all those books; he could certainly imagine her masturbate with a book - now that was a thought to hold on to, maybe he should bring that up sometimes. Her unbroken fervour in the sack, as they now alternated between sleeping at the villa and the ship every other day led him to believe that it was just something like that.

The training with Tonks, their studies and the training with the Revenge filled their timetable enough that he didn't really notice it at first, and only thought she was just as tired as he was.

But then, she started slacking in her studies.

In training, her swordplay was getting sloppy, so much that Harry started looking good in comparison. Her spellwork was getting worse, too, she had started slipping incantations again, although she had a firm grasp on wordless casting for weeks.

He started worrying when it became common that he would find her sitting somewhere, a book in lap, but staring into the distance with a yearning look. He tried to ask her about it, but after he got the third "It's nothing!" from her, he left it be. He still worried about her, but knew that she would come to him in her own time.

August 15th, the town square

"HARRY! HELP!" one of the twins yelled as the mob dragged them across the street and towards the harbour.

"You must stop this!" Harry told Matty in concern, as they all hurried to catch up with the sailors, who were carrying, pushing and hauling the tied-up twins towards the harbour under raucous laughter, while clinking their mugs and firing their guns. More and more people were leaving their work and joined the procession.

"Why? They tried to poison someone, and that's the punishment," Matty chuckled.

"That was no poison," Hermione wheezed from Harry's side, as she tried to keep up with their large strides. "It was only some prank!"

"HAAAARRRYYYY!" one of the twins shrieked in a rather girlish way.

Matty just shook his head with a broad grin. "Doesn't matter; get caught doing foul, you get a 'haul. That's in the codex!" he shouted, and the crowd eagerly picked it up and canted along.

"Is this really necessary?" Margret asked. "I know they can be annoying" - she stated, to which Henry added a "True, true!" as the twins were carried aboard the Pathfinder - "but isn't this a bit extreme?"

ooOOoo

True to form, the twins had invented a new treat, which they called Parrot Cracker. Also true to form, they introduced the public to this new invention by slipping it to a bunch of people in the 'Red A', when everybody was sitting together after the daily lesson on board of the Pathfinder. They were currently discussing the differences in handling between the Pathfinder and the Revenge, as they planned to take the bigger ship out on the ocean tomorrow for the first time.

To be fair, the effect of six man-sized parrots squawking in the inn was hilarious, and the treat worked exactly the ten seconds the twins had intended, giving everybody a good laugh. What they hadn't intended to was to be found out and caught while slipping some more of these.

ooOOoo

"You know that these were only joke articles, don't you?" Harry asked nervously, while the twins yelled frantically for help as some ropes were tied to their wrists and a few men pulled two ropes under the boat and up the other side, all under the cheers of their friends and the spectators.

"I think this has gone far enough," Remus added, grabbing Matty's arm and pulling the man around. "It was just a harmless prank! You are under an oath not to harm a friend of Lord Black!"

"Hey, don't worry; in this case, we are just pranking them back. We do this a lot - they won't get a scratch - these ropes are charmed to keep at least five feet distance to the hull. If they start a prank war with pirates, they have to play by our rules," Matty said with a smirk as the men took the twins and started to give them the heave-ho, swinging them as high as they could.

Harry had to admit that the girlish screams of the twins were funny. Tonks was just grinning broadly. She was one of the people who got a cracker slipped, so she thought it was only fair game. Even the Grangers nodded their consent. Now that they knew the boys wouldn't be harmed, they could approve of this educational measure. And maybe enjoy it a wee tiny bit.

'After all, you don't witness a keelhauling every day,' Hermione reasoned silently, as she stepped closer to embrace Harry while she watched the show.

"We don't mind a good prank, but it's tradition that if someone gets caught during a prank, they get keelhauled. You know, like the old saying: If you can't stand the heat, stay the hell out of my gun deck! They won't be harmed; this is just a good bit of fun, like a good dunking. But it might quench their antics a bit," Matty admitted while the men and the crowd started counting down from three, and laughing out loud as the twins were released in upswing, thus thrown overboard in a high arc. They landed with huge splashes, and the men quickly took the ropes to pull them through in astounding speed.

Gasping for breath, they surfaced at the other side no more than five seconds later, to be hauled aboard under laughs and back slaps from the pirates, who quickly undid the ropes. Immediately, the same guys who were keelhauling the twins only seconds ago started placing orders for these crackers, inquiring about other stuff the twins had in store, as if they were kids in Zonko's.

ooOOoo

"Everything alright?" Harry asked them as the crowd had returned to the inn and whatever they did before, leaving the dripping twins and their friends on the Pathfinder.

"You know, Harry - apart from the being scared shitless part," Fred started.

"And the wetting your pants part," George continued.

"This keelhauling thing was rather fun!" they chorused with a set of really disturbing grins.

"We might use this for something," George proposed, turning to his twin.

"Maybe another daydream series?" Fred replied thoughtfully.

"How about this, guys..." Remus said as he approached them and pulled them into a conspiratorial huddle and whisper, from which one of their heads occasionally emerged, looking appraisingly at Harry, before dipping back.

This was the day Adventure Dreams, the version of the Patented Daydreams targeted at a male audience, was born; a series Harry would contribute many a memory to.

*** August 17th, the Villa, early afternoon. ***

"Harry? Can we talk?"

Harry looked up from his transfiguration book. He was currently sitting in the library couch, as it became his habit after lunch while it was too hot to be outside. Hermione often retreated for a short kip,

claiming the heat made her drowsy. Today, she had obviously cut that short and sought him out, standing meekly in front of him.

Recognizing that this probably meant that he would finally get to know what had been bothering her the last week - although he already had a suspicion - Harry placed a parchment scrap into the book to mark his place, shut it and wandlessly levitated it over to the table.

Hermione smiled at him, she hated it when he dog-eared books to mark the spot. Granted, he never would have done that with such an old tome, but she loved him showing effort. She knew he was also showing off a bit for her, but her inner voice rationalized that the tome would be in the way on the couch, anyway, and such a valuable book should be handled with reverence.

When the book was placed on the table, Harry gave her a vague hand motion, indicating her to join him and start talking. It was something she knew after their long years of friendship. Normally, she would just flop down beside him and start talking, but this time, she wanted to talk him into something that he wouldn't want to do. The last time she did that, it resulted in her giving his Firebolt to the professors behind his back, something she still regretted.

"Harry? I know you already have made up your mind, but..." she started, and her courage left her for a moment. Anxiously, instead of sitting next to him, she knelt in front of him, taking both his hands in hers, making him raise an eyebrow. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

"Can we please attend Hogwarts?" she begged, cringing and expecting him to be incensed and shout at her.

Taking a long look at his lover, her beautiful hazel eyes pressed shut in fear, Harry gave a deep sigh. Didn't she know him at all? He already had guessed it would be about that, and he never would blow up at her because of something as simple as that. A bit saddened, he asked her a simple "Why should we?"

Hermione's eyes shot open wide. She didn't expect him to actually talk it over with her. Hectically, she brought her thoughts in order to present her reasoning.

"Well, although we do learn a lot here, and Tonks and Remus do a very good job at this, there is still so much we have to learn. She's an Auror and he's a Defence Master, but..."

"I know," Harry interrupted her fast-paced stream of conscience. "I've been trying to make sense of that book here for days, and both couldn't help me. There is a lot of theory behind human transfiguration they don't understand entirely, neither," he admitted.

Hermione felt like a weight had dropped from her chest when Harry mentioned his struggles with the advanced topics. She had been terribly afraid that he would just accept it and keep using the simpler spells. But now she knew that they shared a motivation to get better education.

"Yes, exactly that - you know Remus and I wanted to ward the beach against sharks, but neither of us understands those books I found about warding. Remus said while he knew some temporary stuff and standard stuff that is defence related - he didn't know enough about those to set up new ones. He never took Runes at NEWT level, only Arithmacy for spell construction," Hermione told him in her happy rapid fire mode while she got up and cuddled into his side.

"And there is still Riddle. We need to be prepared to fight him, and the longer we take, the more people get hurt. Right now, he's weak, but the longer we wait, the more he recovers," she waved the guilt trip card expertly, just in case his new study habits didn't completely override his innate laziness. She had been prepared to get in a blazing row with him to beg and weasel him into going back, so she wasn't above using a little psychology to enhance her chances. Especially as she was right and knew he already felt the same.

"I know, I know," he sighed. "Everything in me screams to get over there and blast his scaly arse into oblivion. But I don't know how to deal with Dumbledore," Harry stated in a pained voice as he leaned his head against hers and closed his eyes to relax them from the strain the tiny scribble of the old tome had proven to be.

"Harry, please. We will find a way to deal with him. Remus told you that we could. We just need to put our heads together and make a plan. But please," she pleaded, glad that he was at least a bit willing, before changing her tune and switching to seductive voice. "I'll make

it worth your while, I promise. Wherever, whatever and whenever - I'll do it. I'll even let you bugger me and all," she whispered into his ear, nibbling at his earlobe, knowing how much that affected him.

Harry tensed when she did so, just like he usually did when she teased him that way, and so she turned her head and smiled at him.

"Are you trying to bribe me?" he asked her with a strained voice that sounded a bit off. She could hear the deep emotion laced in his voice, just below the surface.

"Does it work?" she replied saucily, batting her eyelashes at him. Suddenly, the world started spinning for Hermione. Sadly, it was not for the reason she had wanted it to do.

Instead, Harry had stood abruptly, throwing her off to the couch, and stomped to the door, yanking it open. "No!" he yelled from the hallway as he threw it close.

ooOOoo

"Harry?" Margret's voice penetrated the sound of the jungle near the gardens, where Harry was sitting on a low, but strong branch of a tropical tree.

Harry didn't really hear her; for he wasn't really in the mood for talking. 'How dare she do that?' He thought, still seething inside. 'I was willing to go along, but she tried to manipulate me!'

He suddenly noticed the branch of the tree he used as makeshift bench bending a bit further as a weight was placed next to him. Turning his head in surprise, he identified it as Margret. She had silently approached and sat with him.

Now that she finally had his attention, Margret started speaking in soft tones.

"Would you like to talk to me?"

"Not really."

Unnoticed by Harry, Margret performed a perfect Hermione-style roll of her eyes at the teenager's response.

"That's okay, but I would really like to know why my daughter is currently bawling her eyes out in her bathroom and refusing to open. I won't ask if you had a fight - that much is obvious. But what happened?"

"She asked me to return to Hogwarts with her," was the huffed reply.

"And you declined, I presume," she said with a knowing nod.

"No! I would have gone along if we came up with a solution for the old coot, but then she went and tried to manipulate me," he huffed, and glared angrily at Margret when she started to chuckle.

"Let me guess, she promised you some 'favours' if you went along with it?" she made a wild guess, shaking her head and growing serious as he confirmed it with a frown.

"Harry, Harry... Sometimes it astounds me how much growing up with these vile people has damaged you," Margret said with another sad shake of her head, gently hugging him. Harry's response was an accusing glare as he didn't understand what she was hinting at, but assumed the worst.

"I mean, you see something good dangling right in front of your face and still keep looking for the barbed hook hidden inside, Harry. While I can't say that this was the most sensible idea my daughter ever had, did you really think that she would have done that just to manipulate you? She just offered a treat. She wouldn't have offered anything she wouldn't have given you anyway. It's called teasing, banter, jollying. Henry and I do it all the time," she admonished the boy in a motherly way.

"But she did it to make me do something. That's bribing. I don't like being manipulated," Harry insisted with a manly huff.

Margret laughed out loud. "So you never promised her a back rub or snog if she were to put a book aside and go swimming with you? Or promised to go book shopping?"

Her laughter turned into a wide grin as Harry blushed hotly. "Hypocrite," she called him teasingly as she wrapped her arm around his shoulders for a hug to take the bite out of her comment.

"I've really buggered that thing up, haven't I?" he sheepishly asked when she finally released him.

"Yes, pretty much," Margret responded, nodding with an overly broad grin on her face.

Harry shook his head and stood. "Thanks for the kick in the pants, but if you excuse me, I have some serious apologies to deliver," he said and went off into the jungle.

ooOOoo

Completely spent from crying for nearly an hour, Hermione picked herself up from the tiles of her bathroom. She couldn't believe how stupid she had been. He was going along already and she still had pulled all stops to make him do what she wanted. While his reaction was well over the top - and he would pay for that - it wasn't as if she couldn't tell that Harry might react badly to manipulation, even in jest. She'd have to put things straight when he came back, but not now. All she wanted was to crawl into her bed and sleep. A brief sob overcame her as she remembered that she would probably have to sleep alone tonight. Biting down on her lip to stop herself, she pulled herself together to make it at least to the bed. Shuffling forward, she avoided looking into the mirror as she passed it. She knew that she probably looked a fright. She didn't care.

Approaching the door she remembered to remove her spellwork to keep it locked and silenced, and then she pulled the door open. To immediately throw it shut again with a high-pitched yelp. Frantically, she ran her hands through her hair and wiped her face at a towel hanging nearby, cleaning up the worst mess before taking a deep breath, and slowly pulling the door open again.

"I'm sorry," Harry said from his kneeling position and handed her the bunch of beautiful flowers he picked for her. She absentmindedly noticed that some colours didn't go well with each other, but squished that thought at once, and took a deep sniff of the intoxicating smell of the exotic blossoms, before remembering to look at the messenger still kneeling in front of her. Briefly, her anger at how he had stormed off welled up and she pondered whether to shoot him or not, but he looked so miserable himself that her anger evaporated quickly.

"Your mother explained to me how normal people behave. I was a stupid git. My reaction was totally unwarranted. Of course we will return for sixth year. Forgive me?" he asked in a small voice.

Hermione shot him a brilliant smile and laid the bouquet aside on a low chest of drawers next to the bathroom door, which contained towels and her 'unmentionables'. Harry took this as an invitation to stand up again; after the fifteen minutes waiting in front of the obviously silenced door his knees were getting a bit sore.

She then started pushing him back across the room and onto the bed, where he fell onto his back. Like a cat, she slowly crawled on top of him and bowed down to kiss him.

Before their lips touched, she paused and rose back to a sitting position. "You didn't agree to go back with me just to make it up, didn't you?" she asked with suspicion laced in her voice.

"No," he smiled, shaking his head. "I would have gone along with it anyway."

Satisfied by his response, she proceeded with the loving kiss she had stalled. After some time of gentle exploration of their oral cavities, she sat back up on his hips and smiled saucily at him. "Come on, let's make up. Maybe I'll even let you try buggering me."

"But you don't have to bribe me anymore," was Harry's confused reply at her offer.

She licked her lips and gave him a randy grin. "I would have gone along with it anyway."

ooOOoo

"We should do something for your mum, don't you think?" Harry stated as he pulled Hermione closer into his shoulder. She had ended up there fifteen minutes ago, after they had completely exhausted each other, cuddling in the afterglow.

"Hmm?" was all that Hermione uttered as she continued trying to burrow herself deeper into her lover.

"You know, she did so much for us. Helping me, bringing us together, settling our disputes..." he ticked off at his fingers, and yelped as Hermione nipped his chest.

"Not to forget keeping Dad at bay," she whispered into his armpit, making him flinch away from the tickle with a giggle.

"But what could we give her?" He asked after a few more moments of lying blissfully in her embrace.

"I remember she once asked for some Polyjuice potion after she heard about my mishap in second year," Hermione giggled, drawing some intricate circles on his ribcage with her finger.

"Hmm? What for?" Harry purred, completely focussed on the lines being drawn on his skin.

"She found it cute to be a cat-girl. And she hinted about Daddy liking such things very much."

"I can't follow you."

"Well, cat-women do have their fans. That soft fur, the cute muzzle, the purring - although the tail was something irritating, it always flicked and waved of its own accord," Hermione told him, frowning at the memory. "Oh! And another thing - did you know that cats have six tits? It was a weird feeling," she told him as the thought hit her. She just finished saying that as she felt some motion against her thigh. "Did you just twitch at me?" she laughed.

"Guilty," he chuckled and kissed her head. "I love your bits. But I do like them better without hair on them," he chuckled as he groped around for them blindly. "Yeah, much better without hair. The 'girls' being all furry sounds entirely weird to me. But who am I to judge," he said mirthfully as Hermione playfully slapped his hands away.

"What a pity that Polyjuice doesn't work on Muggles," Hermione sighed and shrugged. "She wouldn't want to be stuck looking like that for a month, anyway."

"Hmm. Did I mention that my current book is about human to animal transfiguration? From what I read, there are some intermediate forms possible," Harry mused.

Hermione pushed herself up and let herself rest on her arm, half reclined. "Really? I wonder if we could pull that off," she said, worrying her lip, while Harry's attention was focused on something delightfully dangling a couple of inches further down her chest.

"You know, it feels kind of weird talking about getting your mother laid," Harry retorted after prying his eyes off the sight and nipped at her lip, trying to help her worrying it.

Hermione snorted and switched to her 'nagging' voice. "We are wizards - weird comes with the job. Honestly, HarreeeeeEEE!"

She nearly peed herself before Harry stopped tickling her.

ooOOoo

AN:

"Don't you think this is a wee bit excessive?" Pfeil asked as he looked at the scene in front of him.

Hundreds of minions were pulling sleighs with ropes, dressed in loincloths and being whipped by 'supervisors' as they moved huge stone blocks to a structure near the lair's entrance.

"You tell me," embirsiphonelilathia huffed. "Cliffy has gone around the bend. He is mumbling all the time about his prophetic dream about him standing naked on top of a pyramid while hundreds of naked girls praise him as their sun-god."

"Strange," whispered pfeil as he stood next to his co-beta and watched the minions heaving and shoving another block onto the growing pyramid. "I always thought I was the only one with that dream..."

ooOOoo

Many thanks to embirsiphonelilathia for editing this thing, I wouldn't be comfortable posting one word without her looking it over.

Finally, the chapter is finished. It took a long time to polish up and get presentable, as there were a lot of ideas warring in my head and

a lot of work to be done at the stables. But now, the riding track is nearly done and most other issues solved, as well.

Maybe I can get back to publishing on a regular schedule, now.

Chapter 15: Weighting anchor

"Ok, so you want to go back and attend school," Tonks acknowledged what she had just heard during dinner at the villa, forcing her voice into an air of nonchalance. She gingerly placed down her silverware and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin before neatly folding it onto her lap.

"Are you crazy? We went through all this to get you away from Dumbledore, and now you want to go back there? Why?" she suddenly shouted at the two kids, her hair an angry purple. The two sat still, a calm look plastered on their faces, they had expected this and thus, they honestly weren't surprised it happened. Though the volume of the outburst had been an unexpected edition to it, being so loud it caused the remaining people at the table to cringe away from the crazed and powerful woman.

"Dumbledore is irrelevant in the big picture," Harry insisted. "Yes, he is a nuisance until I'm of age, but that's all he amounts to."

"Nuisance? A bloody nuisance? He's one of the greatest wizards of our time! Have you gone mad?" Tonks screeched in response.

"Yes, nuisance," Hermione calmly insisted as well. "While he likes to have things going his way, he is still playing for the right team. Remember, he still has Fawkes as familiar. So while he can be ruthless sometimes, he still has good intentions. He is not the enemy, only a hurdle."

Tonks didn't leave it at that. "Apart from the old codger, you know that this would also mean getting exposed to Him, don't you? He is just waiting for a sign of you showing up somewhere!"

"Yes," Harry acknowledged, "but all of you know that while we all liked our vacation here, it was never stated that we wouldn't be returning to Britain. And with the prophecy stating that only I can deal with Voldemort, I couldn't stand to look at my face in the mirror, knowing that people were getting killed because I decided to sit on a beach," he stated flatly, cutting off Tonks who didn't know how to reply to this properly. While Henry had talked to Harry about the deaths in Britain and how he shouldn't shoulder the guilt of every lost life, a part of Harry wasn't ready to let go of the responsibility he felt for the people there. Harry still believed to a degree that every

life lost was partly his fault if he couldn't stop Voldemort before it happened, he just couldn't shake the blame off as easily as people wanted him to.

"The longer I sit around doing nothing, the stronger his grip on Britain gets. You know that Dumbledore and the Ministry are losing the war as badly as they did the last time," Harry told them what everybody knew but didn't dare to speak out.

"Then take your ship and hit Him in the money bag, if you think you have to do something," Fred proposed. "That would hurt Him badly and you and Hermione would still be rather safe here, and you would do something to soothe your bloody conscience! You know that He wants you even more dead than He did before!"

"Fred! You are a genius!" Harry mock-cheered with his eyes wide open. "Why didn't I think of that? Where would I, a mere mortal, be without your wisdom and council!" Fred harrumphed and turned away when Harry finished his outburst with a look of very fake admiration.

"You see, this idea has come up between us already," Hermione quipped. "We actually went and had words about it with Matty."

"And? What did he say?" George demanded, while Fred was still pouting in a very dramatic pose for being mocked.

"In a word: Don't!" Harry stated calmly, savouring the feeling to have the others hanging at his every word as he made a dramatic pause.

"Matty told us that there is no way the men would follow him into a fight with a warship, yet," Hermione spoiled his moment, while putting her hand on Harry's slumping shoulder. She knew that this had irked him slightly, although he couldn't blame them.

"I didn't say he should go mano a mano with the Victory, I said he should capture some cargo vessels," Fred defended his position. "Surely, the men would follow him for that," he smirked.

Harry blushed slightly before he replied in a murmur. Upon collective request, he was forced to repeat his answer, under the slight smirk of his girlfriend. "Matty said that if I practice very hard for a few more months, they might consider it."

"Didn't Matty say the men would follow you, back when they tested you?" Henry put his two pence in.

"Well, that obviously meant they would fight alongside him, but not that they would trust him not to run the ship aground, again," Tonks noted with a sweet smile on her lips, batting her eyebrows at the embarrassed Captain in training.

"I just scraped that reef," Harry gnarled through his teeth while trying hard not to imitate a tomato too much. "I got confused and mixed up port and starboard for a moment - I corrected my mistake in time, didn't I?" That rebuttal was presented with crossed arms and the huff of a true leader. Hermione petting his back in support destroyed the picture a bit, but Harry let her do her thing, as he quite liked what her massaging hand did there.

"Anyway, Matty said that this point was moot anyway, as they surely would encounter a warship at some point, and the men are very much aware of the extra risk," Harry added.

"What extra risk?" Margret inquired nosily.

"Let's suppose we are successful in capturing a pureblood merchant," Hermione stipulated in her usual mind-game way of talking. "What would the logical reaction be?"

Tonks was the obvious candidate to answer the question quickest. "Increase patrols in that area," she replied instantly, ever the Auror.

"Exactly. This would probably be a massive increase, as they value to be protected is high, and there isn't that much else to do for the fleet. If we are able to capture a merchant, we take top priority in comparison to smugglers," Hermione lectured, and drew a very dark picture while doing her usual thing.

"The islanders are not in favour of drawing too much attention, so we would only be able to make attacks far away from the island, and only few. Apart from limiting the damage we can cause; given the sheer number of enemy warships, we will certainly run into a few of them," she added, waiting for the others to catch up on the facts.

"Then we outrun the bigger ones,"

"And fight the smaller ones,"

"Problem solved!" Fred and George chorused.

Remus put his hand up. "Fred, George" he said soft and slowly, just like in class. "Battling ship to ship is always a fight for death; you can't just apparate or portkey away from a moving platform," he said in his teacher's voice. "The guns don't care if you shield, and you can't dodge a cannonball. And even if we manage to evade the patrols, they would start creating convoys with escorts. There is a reason why historically, piracy only worked as long as they were few and kept the hell away from warships. There is nothing to gain in such a fight," he said, putting things into perspective for the trigger-happy redheads.

"Thank you, Remus. Actually, this is the normal risk. The men are much more concerned about the extra risk," Harry told them, drawing a deep breath to launch his explanation.

"If we start hurting Tom's finances badly, it is only a matter of time until anybody finds out, one way or another, that I'm responsible for it. So it won't take long until Voldemort himself comes here looking for jolly old me. The men aren't exactly fond of this possibility," he illustrated the men's fears Matty had brought up.

Fred and George each shuddered at this thought. This would be the worst scenario. Fighting against Voldemort with nowhere to run would be a nightmare. In Britain, you had at least the theoretical chance to run away. Even if wards were present, you could run until you passed them and then simply apparate away. Not so on a ship or an island.

"Even worse," Remus voiced his concerns, already having sided with the kids. "You said that Harry would need at least a few months to learn leading this ship properly, never mind in a battle. By then, He might already have taken over Britain," he speculated. As Henry and Margret shot him alarmed glances because of that statement, he shortly interrupted his speech to explain his rationale.

"The situation isn't really that bad now, but who knows what might happen in the next months. For all we know, He might manage to install a puppet Government by then, and come here with an

armada and army," he explained, and while no one was particularly glad about it, nobody could disagree with his prognosis, especially not the kids. They had come to this conclusion all by themselves already during their brainstorming session.

"That's why I decided to take no risks. I want to keep this hideout out of Tom's knowledge and grasp for as long as possible and take the fight to him," Harry stated with no room for doubt in his voice.

"But you aren't ready, yet!" Tonks insisted.

Harry gave her a wary snort in response. "And when will I be? When do you think I will be ready? I can already outfight each of you, even when I hold back. And I can take on you and Remus together if I don't. Tell me, how much more can you teach me?" he asked her.

Rather unexpected, Remus came to his aid. "He is right, Tonks. We have done all we can. We know defence well, but we are just average teachers, nowhere in the league of what Hogwarts or the Academy provides. Can you teach him advanced transfiguration like Dumbledore did in the Ministry battle? Or charm work like Voldemort showed there? Maybe you can teach him all about wards?" he continued in a soft voice, as Tonks slowly backed down and surrendered to the unavoidable. When he had ended Tonks had slumped down in the seat, her hair mousy and hanging limply from her head.

"Exactly. That's why we want to get back into Hogwarts. Even only the first year of NEWT courses will help us tremendously in developing our skills, which we need when we finally fight Voldemort," Hermione agreed with her boyfriend, although with slightly different priorities on the order of reasons.

"What about tutors?" Henry inquired weakly.

"The only way would be an apprenticeship, and these run for years, and only one topic at a time," Hermione told her father. "Also, they require NEWTs to start with and would leave us separated and completely open to attacks, as we would have to live with our Masters. We are much safer in Hogwarts, where we are well warded and can access all the teachers at the same time."

"Okay, but why Hogwarts?" Henry whined. "Can't you just go to another school? I remember you talking about two other schools, something French and something Russian, wasn't it?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, Dad. Hogwarts is the only way; the other schools won't help much."

"Why? They can't be that bad," Henry demanded. "Especially since they don't have this arse as Headmaster! Heaven knows what he would do to you!"

Tonks shook her head ruefully. "I hate to say this, but that arse is still better than Durmstrang. Dumbledore might be manipulative, but he's not dark, or his phoenix would have left him long ago. He tries to do the right things, but he has a tendency to run over individuals for the greater good," she told Henry, who harrumphed annoyed at her as she dared to hit him with logical arguments.

"Durmstrang, on the other hand, is a tad different," she continued, to be interrupted by the twins.

"You can say that! They even have a class that teaches Dark Arts!" George commented.

Fred took over immediately. "Harry and Hermione would be murdered in their sleep, the first night they dare to actually sleep. The whole school is basically a breeding ground for potential Death Eaters!"

"Stop kidding us," Margret demanded. "A whole school?"

"Certainly not everyone, Victor was very nice..." Hermione rose to Durmstrang's defence, but faded out with a blush under the looks of the others. She felt mortified when Harry gave her a questioning eyebrow, while smirking at her. It had only been a harmless kiss, nothing more!

"While these two are exaggerating a bit, it's still part true, Margret," Remus took control of the discussion. "That school is far up north in probably eastern Europe or Scandinavia, and over there on the continent, the life of a wizard is a bit harsher. Britain is very isolated and thus easy to keep civilized. This makes the British wizards life rather easy. Apart from the Death Eater attacks, there is not really

much to fear for the average wizard here in this sanitized utopia. But in Europe, you have to live with Vampires, Werewolves, Dragons and all the other nasty creatures that live there," he lectured, getting a glare and an elbow from Tonks as he counted himself among the 'nasty creatures'. This argument would certainly continue later, he knew.

Taking a deep breath and stretching his aching side, he continued. "This creates a certain type of wizard. Most of them have absolutely no qualms to use Dark Arts, and in some countries, they do so on a daily basis. And of course, there are some people in this school who would join Voldemort in a second for a few coins. Also, while they would certainly teach the stuff Harry would need, they don't accept Muggleborn there, so Hermione wouldn't be able to go there."

"Ok, that's a reason," Margret agreed. "But how about this French school? Beaux chapeau?" she inquired.

"Beauxbaton," corrected Hermione. "It's a good school, but it's not in Hogwarts' league, not even in Durmstrang's."

"It's not that bad," Remus interrupted. "Truly, it's not the premier European school, but it is far ahead of the small institutes and has been a part of the Big Three for centuries."

"Sorry to interrupt, but isn't it girls only?" Harry asked. "When they visited, they only had girls with them, hadn't they?"

"No, they have boys attending - actually lots of them - but there were only a handful accompanying them to Hogwarts. But these were very calm and well mannered, so you might not have noticed them in the crowd of cute girls," Tonks told Harry, and morphed into a copy of a younger girl with long, brunette hair and a distinct 'French' look for a moment, batting her eyelids seductively at the boy.

"And why were only so few at Hogwarts?" Hermione inquired with a slight frown at the flirting Auror. She still was self-conscious to some degree and didn't like if Harry was exposed to girls that looked much better than she did, even if they were only artificial. She knew that there was no danger coming from Tonks - or any other girl, if she were to believe in what Harry told her - but she couldn't just turn off years of conditioning.

"There was a simple reason for that, the same reason why they had me and other female Aurors attending for security," Tonks said as she changed her form again, with a wink at Hermione. She didn't exactly manage a copy of Fleur, but it was close enough for someone lacking Veela powers.

"The Delacour girl. She had to attend, since she was the best student of Beauxbaton, but they knew this would cause problems," she said as she had reverted to her bubblegum-pink haired favourite form.

Everybody settled back into his seat as Tonks continued her explanation. "You know that she is part Veela - and as any young Veela, she experienced burst of her allure. Usually, the best thing to avoid incidents is to isolate her from men, but this was impossible in the cramped quarters inside the carriage."

"In order to avoid problems, Beauxbaton just left most of the boys at home, and took only those who could deal with the allure. Because there were only few, they settled for taking mostly girls with them, who naturally were better at school, anyway," she ended with a dig at the men at the table, receiving the frowns she had aimed for in return.

"There was always one female Auror on duty in the carriage to ensure that no boy strolling by would be drawn in by her allure and act rashly. Additionally, I usually shadowed her in various forms during the day, just in case. I actually had to turn that Corner boy away three times," she chuckled, with the twins joining her.

"Doesn't matter, the school is certainly not what we need," Hermione said quietly, with Harry snorting and nodding his agreement.

"Oh, really? Elaborate, then," Tonks quipped, making a twirling motion with her hand, prompting them to answer.

Hermione took a second to formulate her thoughts before starting to explain. "You see, Beauxbaton is a school that specializes in good manners, above all. Because of this, the defence-related topics are a bit neglected."

"I don't understand what you're hinting at, darling," Margret said.

"You know that the Goblet chose Fleur as the best of Beauxbaton. Still, she finished every single task last. She even had to be rescued from the lake. Yet still, after only a year of tutelage at Gringotts, she is a proficient curse breaker. Since that shows that she isn't dumb or magically weak, her failure at the tournament must be laid at the feet of the school. We need the best."

The others were looking pensive for a while after Hermione concluded her speech, but then started to nod approvingly, one after the other. Hermione smirked at Harry in triumph, getting a peck on the cheek by her boyfriend.

Tonks rolled her eyes at their behaviour. "Well, fine. But how do you want to deal with Dumbledore? You're not really on his birthday present list anymore, you know?"

"We're all ears," Remus prompted, waving his hand in a 'get to the point' way. Tonks actually enlarged hers, smiling innocently at them.

Hermione cleared her throat to start her presentation. The first version had been impressive and over twenty minutes long before Harry made her simplify it. She even had made a huge string diagram of all factors she deemed important. At first, she tried to defend its use, but faltered after Harry gave her a long, hard look. They negotiated a truce at a simple presentation chart, but at least Harry used the inspiration to show her his own version of a string diagram later that night. Hermione shook her head to banish the sweet memories and got straight to the core of the matter.

"The biggest problem in all this is that while we thought about what to do, we realized that we actually still need Dumbledore," she proclaimed.

"Why's that?" Margret interrupted her daughter. As everybody was looking expectantly at them, Harry cleared his throat and took it upon himself to clarify this point.

"While we are going back to further our education, our main reason - well, at least my main reason," he quipped at Hermione, who harrumphed and averted her face in a pout, "is to find a way to finally take the fight to Voldemort."

"According to these two clowns," he said with a nod at the twins, who were waving back cheekily, not the slightest bit annoyed at the title, "Snape is still needed to brew potions in bulk. So I have seriously weakened him. I have to press this advantage and move in for the kill before he finds a cure. And this takes us directly to the root of the problem."

"Does anybody of you know why Voldemort didn't die back then?" He asked into the round. Naturally, only dumb looks and shrugs were aimed his way. Harry smiled at them in return.

"Exactly, no one knows. Or at least, that's what we were told," he said, letting the words linger for a moment.

"Figures," Fred said, having connected the dots quickest. "Trust Dumbledore to keep everything worth knowing to himself," he snickered as his brother was having a visible epiphany as well.

"What do you mean?" Margret asked the two boys sitting across the table. It would take her a while to learn not to ask the twins questions.

"Our esteemed Headmaster is very fond of knowledge," Fred told her with a wide grin.

"And not only because he is leading an institute of learning," George helpfully added before Fred was allowed to continue.

"Actually, he is especially fond of knowledge no one else..."

"but him ..." George quipped.

"Thank you, brother dear - no one else but him possesses," Fred finished.

"You know, that word sounds nearly as scary as Harry when he talks to snakes," George observed with a strange look at his brother.

Fred looked confused for a moment before beaming a smile at him. "Indeed, it does. And if I were to have a lisp, it would be even worse. Maybe if we..."

"Yeah, and then we also could..." George replied thoughtfully.

"Parsel Pastries?"

"I am thinking Parsel Pumpkin juice; we're getting to predictable by using confectionery..."

"Indeed..."

"What they were going to say," Harry spoke up, diverting the attention back to the real topic, away from the train wreck in progress between the muttering twins, "was that Dumbledore knows more than everybody else about Voldemort and the things he's done."

Remus nodded gravely, and Tonks also agreed. "Right, if anybody knows how to stamp His ticket, then it's our esteemed Mugwump."

"So the only man who can help you defeat Voldemort is the man who wants to control your whole life?" Margret demanded. As Harry nodded his agreement, she threw her hands in the air in frustration. "This is getting ridiculous! Like straight out of a penny dreadful!" she huffed.

Henry was still computing everything. "To be perfectly clear about this; you need Dumbledore to show you how to finally get rid of Voldemort? Bugger, I'd hate to see how that plays out; he holds all the aces in that game."

Harry's grin took a diabolical note as he was about to reply.

"Not all. For there is still that pesky prophesy, which states that only I am able to vanquish the Dark Lord. No matter what he tries, only I can do it. So I hold half the aces," he grinned, and this time, everybody had to agree with his reasoning.

Hermione used that break in conversation to hand Harry her chart and rose to explain their little plan.

"Well, to bring this back to topic, I want to show you what we came up with" she began while Harry stuck her chart to the wall, enlarging it while doing so. "At first I thought trying to threaten him to destroy him politically with the blood wards and Harry's childhood would be

the way to go, but this raises some problems," she recited, stepping next to the poster-sized sheet of parchment.

"First things first, while it is an outrageous thing, blood bindings are not exactly outlawed; you see, in fifteen-sixty-one, there was..." Hermione continued, starting to point out various legal writings on her chart, which magically enlarged themselves when she tapped them with her wand, and how they contributed to her conclusion. The twins leaned back, yawned and conjured nightcaps, putting them on. Hermione only gave them a scathing look of disapproval, but knew better than to fall for their shameless baiting.

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"Also, people we don't want to know and ruthless enough to use them would learn about that technique," Tonks threw a valid point in when Hermione had finished after a few minutes.

"Right, didn't think about that one," Hermione admitted sheepishly.

"So we thought we would use the good old-fashioned way," Harry smirked, winking at Hermione. "Blackmail," he said his keyword, and Hermione launched into another monologue about what she thought to be a suitable plan to cover all the bases, pointing at different sections of her chart. The twins were already asleep by then.

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"Ok, so basically you think that, Dumbledore wants Harry back badly because of the prophecy, and with the additional the possible public backlash if Harry went to the press, you have enough to make him agree to an oath not to intervene in your lives if Harry comes back to Britain and will help him fight Voldemort?" Remus concluded after Hermione had finished, which she confirmed it with a nod.

"Sorry, but I don't think that will work," the now well tanned werewolf threw a spanner in her works. The hurt face she made when he told her so was as cute and accusing as like from a kicked puppy.

"Don't pout, Hermione. With everyone else, it might work, but you forget we are talking about Albus Dumbledore," Remus laughed.

"So he is too magical powerful to listen to reason?" Margret quipped, demanding clarification about why her daughter's plan was deemed impracticable.

Tonks roared with laughter as she heard that. "Merlin, no," she chuckled. "Although powerful wizards are very full of themselves, there is a bigger problem. He has been a politician for over fifty years! He'll never agree to anything that will be binding in any way."

"And even if he agrees to an oath, you can be sure that he will find a way to circumvent it, and it will be even worse than if he did what he wanted to do outright, because of the restrictions he has to work with," Remus added sombre. "He has been getting what he wants for decades, until lately. This is his game, and we only can lose if we play it his way."

"So we can't?" Hermione whined, and clung to Harry. The boy in question stroked her back, and looked angry. To think that he would be forced to sit by and watch the death toll rise for over a year because of the Headmaster trying to run his life was a bad potion to swallow.

"I didn't say that," Remus grinned, and widened his grin as Hermione's head shot up and swivelled round to face him. "You are only not thinking complicated enough!" he stated, a certain first regarding to Hermione.

"We just have to think more like the pirates we allegedly are! We'll cross and double cross him so hard that he doesn't know what happened when we are done - let me tell you what I am thinking about..." the old Marauder began with a glint in his eyes, while everyone else was skidding to the edge of their seats.

"At first, we need something more tangible to keep you both safe during the year," Remus started to lay out his plans. "By mere coincidence, this was already halfway done by Sirius."

"Really? Did he emancipate me with his will?" Harry asked, earning himself a sigh from his girlfriend and a reprimand that made him shrink into the couch.

"If he did so, would we still be trying to get you out of Dumbledore's and the Dursleys' claws? Honestly, Harry!" she told him with an exasperated roll of her eyes.

"Don't be so harsh with him, Hermione, a bloke can hope, can't he?" Remus laughed. "No, Harry. But he made you the Patriarch of the Blacks, the Black of Black by making you his primary heir. Since all of his will was to be executed immediately, you have gotten his title already, and not when coming to age like with the Potters. While not emancipating you, the position gives you some certain rights, even if you are still underage."

"Oh? Such as?" Harry asked, intrigued.

"Well, you have the right to call honour duels if someone insults or threatens you or your relatives or even call feuds with other houses, and you can bring people into or expulse them from the family."

"One moment, Remus," Hermione interrupted. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I remember duelling was banned internationally."

"It was, but that doesn't cover official competitions, blood feuds and honour duels if issued by Heads of old Houses or Wizengamot members. You know, some people are more equal than others," Remus winked.

"So Harry could just call for a feud with some Voldemort sycophant and get it done with?" Henry smirked smugly. He had but a second to feel smart before Remus, Tonks and even the twins replied with variations of "He better not," spiced with a wide range of expletives.

"Why not?" he whined as his unbeatable plan was shot down.

"Because if he starts doing so without proper reason and evidence, they might call in their alliances with other Houses, and we all would end up in outright warfare with half the wizarding world," Tonks replied, her hair still cycling through colours after the shock.

Seeing Henry still looking confused, she rummaged in her Muggle glossary. "It's equivalent to tossing the first nuke without provocation," she tried to explain. Henry had to swallow as he became aware of how bad his idea might have turned out.

"Okay, that was important info, no starting a huge war needlessly," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Say, is there any book I can read about this 'Patriarch' business? Just to know the ins and outs, so I don't accidentally start declaring feuds left and right," Harry chuckled at Remus with a glint in his eyes. Remus had a slight suspicion about his godson's motives, but promised to find something for him, whether in the library or at a shop.

"Moving on, any paperwork needed for that family business?" Harry continued, concentrating on the task at hand, and running away with it.

"Nothing important, a short, formal notice to the Ministry and Gringotts is enough," Remus replied in confusion at the sudden change of topic.

"Great! Tonks - consider yourself a Black again, if you want to. And ask your mother, too. I'll sign the papers as soon as you give them to me," Harry said; only to stop at Tonks's unbelieving expression focussed on him. "What?"

"Do you know what you just offered? By taking mom back, you would be forced to pay an appropriate dowry to her - that could cost you thousands of Galleons!"

That information made Harry's eyes widen and his mental wheels whirr. He had no idea how much money was still left; in all the action, he had completely forgotten to check on their stash. "Can I still afford that?" he meekly asked Remus, who had been tasked with keeping the money.

The Marauder only rolled his eyes and snorted a laugh. "Easily!"

"Good, so no problem there. And bring me whatever is needed to kick out Bellatrix," Harry said with a grim face. Remus nodded, frowning equally fiercely.

"Don't forget about the Malfoys," Tonks quipped. "While a House of their own, they are in line of succession via Narcissa and Draco," she explained, and had to smile at the smirk Harry developed while she was talking. "Spill!" she commanded.

"Oh, nothing particular - I am just imagining the tantrum Draco will throw when he gets notified of this status change," Harry said, smiling in a dreamy way.

"What about the Grangers? Can I also bring them into the family so that they gain protection?" Harry suddenly asked.

"I want to make sure that Dumbledore can't do anything to them to blackmail me with," he stated with a concerned look at his girlfriend and her parents. Hermione was sorely tempted to snog the stuffing out of him if he continued to be so god-damned chivalrous.

"Hold your horses, pup," Remus laughed. "I was just getting there when you tried to give us all a whiplash with your sudden change of direction and went off on your tangent. There is a way to do this. I doubt you two would be averse to this, since it is only a formality with you two. What would you think about making your relationship with Hermione official?" Remus concluded with a broad grin.

Henry had to fight a sudden coughing fit with the help of his smirking wife. He had arranged with the fact that his daughter and Harry were 'living in sin' - as his mother had called it back then with Margret - he wasn't ready for that big a change, yet. Margret, on the other hand, was already devising colour schemes and flower arrangements in the back of her mind.

While everybody would have expected otherwise, the twins didn't comment or tease. This was much too important, and they never would destroy such a moment with jokes. They would wait and tease the hell out of the two later...

Meanwhile, the teens were looking at each other like snakes at a rabbit. Was this what they wanted? Engaged to be married? Marriage? Harry would certainly think so, but was he worthy of Hermione? He would have been surprised if he knew that Hermione thought the same thoughts, just the other way round.

"You consider setting up a formal marriage contract," Tonks interrupted her lover, not asking, but stating it as fact.

"A marriage contract?" Margret asked in a displeased voice, her eyes boring into the other woman, while the children had squeaked

in unison at Tonk's proposal. Henry didn't react visibly anymore; he was petrified with shock from all he had heard.

"I know, that's medieval, barbaric, demeaning to the girl in question, yada, yada, yada," Tonks said in a bored way, gesticulating appropriately. "But think about it - after announcing it officially, Dumbledore can't separate these two."

"You think he would do that?" Margret asked in a fearful way. She never had thought about this possibility.

"As neither of them have magical guardians, he does have a token guardianship over the both of them. It would theoretically allow him to separate them or even negotiate marriage contracts for them, although this hasn't been done against the child's wishes for centuries," Tonks replied. "And if it would serve his plans, I think he would."

"He will of course bemoan the sad necessity of doing so for the greater good after the fact, but he won't hesitate a second," Remus agreed. Of course, this didn't really lighten the mood in the room, not that the kids in question would have heard a word about it. They were currently far, far away with their thoughts.

"But hey, no need to panic, folks. Just take a look at them," Remus laughed at the teen's reaction his small suggestion had caused. "Don't think about it as a binding, unwanted contract; it's just to make it official - it's not as these two aren't destined to do this anyway. With these two, this step is really not much more than an official announcement in the Prophet that gets filed in the Ministry, too," he clarified while the two kids slowly reconnected with reality and paid attention to the topic, again.

"What effect would this have?" Margret inquired while she carefully watched the suddenly awkward interaction between the two kids in question. She could have laughed out loud as they behaved like teens on their first date after these announcements. Both of them were fighting blushes and stealing glances at each other, both obviously trying to espy a sign of approval in the other without giving their own hopes away. It was just too cute.

"Entering such a commitment would cement Harry's position as Prince Black. To be precise, being sixteen already, they both would

become something like emancipated minors in our law, in order to arrange the marriage and all. Dumbledore couldn't claim any legal influence over any of them after that," Tonks explained. Being the daughter of an old pureblood line, even if disgraced, meant that she had greater insight in the customs than anyone present.

"It also would make you all practically members of Harry's family, allowing him to extend Patriarch rights over you. And before you get any ideas, Harry - no, that wouldn't get you to cohabit a dorm with Hermione at Hogwarts - you would have to be married for that," she smirked at the teen.

This made not only Harry, but also Hermione pout. This return to Hogwarts had some serious downsides, she had to admit.

"But doesn't Harry need approval from his guardians to do that? He is still underage, as well as Hermione," Margret pointed out the crux of the matter.

"Yes, that remains a problem, Margret. They need both, muggle and magical," Tonks added with a huff, "I don't think you would disapprove of their union," she told Margret before turning to face her lover. "But I'd really like to hear how you want to get that from the Dursleys and Dumbledore, Remy."

"Nosey, aren't you?" Remus chuckled. "You see, even with Harry's power, it wouldn't be safe to break the enchantments on the Dursleys; so instead, what would happen if Henry and Margret went to the police and filed charges of child abuse?" Remus stated a rhetorical question, continuing spinning his ideas into a plan.

"Let's assume they would tell the tale that Harry, a school friend of their daughter, did join them for the summer, and that they all noticed his many scars at the beach. Not wanting to push the boy, they carefully tried to get to the bottom of that. After a few weeks of spending the holidays with them and starting to officially date their daughter, he had started to open up to them, and tell his story; and they now wanted to report it to the authorities," he concluded with a smile that bared more teeth than a human should have. The twins gave approving nods as they found that lie entirely believable, themselves.

Margret couldn't help but laugh at the plan their friend had come up with. "As we both are medical professionals, they would certainly believe us," she confirmed. "We would probably be able to make the police get a search warrant to confirm things; like the cupboard or the cat-flap and locks on Harry's later room. It should be easy to get the court to give us custody over Harry, as he already is integrated in our lives to some extent."

"And if we get lucky and Vernon is as stupid as we believe him to be, he might even throw a tantrum that gets him arrested on the spot," she added as an afterthought, an idea that made the twins grow pensive.

At this point, they had to make a short break to calm Harry down, since he was getting very emotional about people actually caring enough for him to want to make the Dursleys pay. Hermione would have gladly hexed them into the next century - that much he knew - but having Margret going all bear-mother for him was touching him deep inside. Even Henry was more than eager to get the Dursleys their due, while the twins had started whispering excitedly with each other, which was no good sign for Vernon.

"Wouldn't Dumbledore just memory charm everyone and undo that?" Harry finally asked, sure that there was something that would go wrong. It was just too good to be true.

"He might try, but once we make our complaint, it will be in the Social Services computer network and distributed to at least two or three different places. They would chew out the officers for forgetting to continue investigation and take it up, again. I doubt your Headmaster would be able to hack himself into the servers or find all the files spread on desks everywhere in the SS," Henry stated, his conviction getting confirmed by Tonks.

"He couldn't. Even if he tried, he would also act illegal doing this. The only thing that allows such measures is to protect the Statute of Secrecy. But this would be a pure Muggle custody matter, which would make him endanger the secrecy with his machinations. Even the Supreme Mugwump isn't exempt from that law," she tweeted, remodelling her hair into a judge's wig.

"I am more afraid that he would try to do this memory stuff to the kids," Margret warily stated.

"Hermione told me about the way you are protecting your secrets by deleting memories of nonmagicals left, right and centre without hesitation. While I reluctantly agree with you that he's still not a bad person per se, I doubt he would hesitate to do that to them."

"I think I should tell you a few things about obliviations, Margret," Tonks said softly. "First, we are only able to delete a memory, but not to give you new ones. This means when the secret is exposed, we arrive, delete the last few minutes and they won't know. They might not even notice the missing time."

"In Harry's case, it is different," she stated affirmatively. "Dumbledore would have to delete the whole summer from his memories. Since Harry does know about obliviations, he would suspect foul play after a bit, especially since other people could remind him. Also, it is much harder to delete the memories of a powerful wizard. We even tried to memory charm Harry once in training, and I couldn't. Dumbledore has seen the power Harry can wield, and he isn't dumb enough to antagonize Harry any more by trying such a stupid stunt."

"But Hermione," Margret interjected, but let Tonks continue when the woman raised a defensive hand.

"He might try to use her, that's right. But you have to remember, that if we pull this off, she is Harry's betrothed by the time he can touch them. If Dumbledore does anything to her, he would face Azkaban and a justified blood feud with House Potter, Black, and all their allies. He needs Harry, so he wouldn't touch Hermione with a ten foot pole," Tonks insisted.

"You see, this would force Albus to play nice," Remus tried to regain control of the conversation. "Where was I...? Right - charges against the Dursleys! After we filed them, it should be easy to have Harry placed with the Grangers, as he already is familiar with them and only needs guardians for less than two years," Remus summed up the first part of his plan, which found whole-hearted approval with the present company.

On the magical side, things were a bit more complicated. There was no way they would manage to get the guardianship away from Dumbledore, but the plan to make Dumbledore give approval was

even better than Operation Dursley; a real Marauder masterpiece. Given that Remus had been the planner of that group, and the twins were not lacking in this compartment, either - Dumbledore would never know what hit him.

ooOOoo

"Okay, that being clear, I also propose to get the both of them portkeys to Grimmauld place. It'd be best if they are necklaces with password activation," Tonks stated. "I want these two to be able to get out of any trouble they might run into."

Then, she added an afterthought. "And I will teach you both apparition, starting tomorrow, rules be damned," causing both the kids to light up in anticipation.

"Maybe we should also add Portkey creation," Hermione tried her luck, her whole body poised in anticipation. She bounced happily in her seat as Tonks gave a short "Ok, we'll try," as reply.

"Alright, that would cover everywhere outside of Hogwarts," Remus agreed. "But there's a problem with that, neither would work in or around Hogwarts, they'd be sitting ducks there," he said, a grave look on his face as he peered at Tonks, who nodded thoughtfully in return.

"Then they just have to run out of the wards," George quipped.

"Or use one of the secret passageways out," Fred agreed.

"See, no problem," George concluded.

"Provided they manage to slip out of our esteemed Headmaster's grasp," Fred added.

"Theoretically, but I wouldn't put it past the Headmaster to put the wards into lock-down to keep Harry from leaving at the end of the year," Remus admitted. "This means that he would use the same means that prevent him from entering Black Manor to keep Harry inside the castle," he added for Henry's and Margret's understanding.

"Won't the tunnels be under the wards?" Harry asked.

"No, the wards extend about fifty feet deep into the ground, to prevent tunnelling," Remus told them. "Remember, it is a castle, and it was laid siege to multiple times before and after it got turned into a school."

"Wait! I remember that half of the lake is inside the boundaries, and it's deeper than fifty feet," Tonks suddenly exclaimed happily.

"I very much doubt he could dive under the wards," Henry retorted. "Fifty feet down is a lot for someone without scuba equipment."

Hermione had thought along the same lines, but had a viable solution. "We could use a bubblehead charm, or Gillyweed," she proposed. "The first is an air bubble and the latter makes you grow gills and flippers for some time," she told her parents.

Tonks snorted at their exchange. "Oooor," she drawled, grinning smugly as Hermione squinted at her in irritation, "you could use a huge ship capable of submerged travel to wait for you in the lake, just like the Durmstrang ship in the Triwizard Tournament," she toothily tweeted at them, laughing out loud as Hermione groaned at her oversight.

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So, as a final backup plan in case of everything going south, it was agreed upon that Remus and Tonks would bring the Revenge over to the Hogwarts Lake, acting as escape vessel. It would stay there, submerged, waiting to get them away. If they went to the island at August 30, since only Harry could send them over, they would manage to get there by the end of September.

With the use of the Boatswain's Whistle Charm they could even call the ship to the surface in case of an emergency, the two of them just enough to man the ship in emergency mode. They planned to contact the adults and arrange a rendezvous point on the British coast to pick them up for the Atlantic crossing. With the new additions to the crew they could make a proper escape into the ocean.

The last correction to the plan was that Henry objected to the timing. Since these troubles weren't expected early, rather near the end of term - when it would matter - it wouldn't do to have the only two -

competent, he added with a smirk in the twin's direction - magical minders away on a ship, thus unreachable in the case of an emergency right at the start of term. They agreed to have them bring it over when things had settled a bit. After all, Hermione, being of age by mid September, could always escort Harry home at Hogsmeade weekends.

That being settled, all of them began to prepare for the return to England, so they could start the first parts of their operation.

*** August 18th, Black Reef, after breakfast ***

Like every day, Hermione and Harry went out to the garden behind the Villa for training. Chatting, they stood on the lawn near the cliff that Tonks had designated the training area.

"Okay, you dripping bags of Flobberworm puss, pay attention!" Tonks yelled from behind them, on the cliff's side. She must have apparated there.

Harry and Hermione whirled around scared, both already in motion to draw their wands, but stopped and stared at their tutor in shock. Tonks had gone crazy. Her hair was in a blonde buzz cut, her jaw squared and her body looking like she had slept in a steroid solution. The combat fatigues completed the picture.

"I love you, Harry, but I'm going to kill you, Remus and Dad," Hermione groaned with finality as she connected the dots.

ooOOoo

Henry had taken to playing various movies from his collection every other night after he managed to power his entertainment electronics with the help of an Emergency Power unit from his old garage. When he had that idea, he made Dobby find and resize all his stuff, and after a test run in one of the Villa's living rooms, he found that the unit was powerful enough to run the TV and the VCR player. The only downside was the headache-inducing noise and the fumes, which were not really adding to the joys of television. He had to do something for that, and get some supplies for the gas guzzling machine. Maybe even a satellite dish.

When he had inquired Remus about it, they quickly ruled out using a silencing charm and an air cleaner, for Remus feared that such powerful charms would most likely fry the electronic stuff in the room. Henry had already mentally settled for the inconvenient solution of having a wire run through the house and the unit somewhere in a shed outside, along with a barrel of gas, but he got more than he had bargained for.

After a few hours of inspection, Remus had charmed the generator to be self-propelling without using gas. Since that device always ran at a fixed speed, Remus had taken the thing apart and just charmed the crankshaft to permanently rotate, something that would be very bad on a car, but worked fine here. A very weak silencing charm later, the unit could be in the same room, although in the far corner, without the remaining annoying whirring sound being too bothersome, eliminating the need to run wires through the villa. People had just to be careful with further magic in that room, lest they fry the sensitive electronics of the entertainment stuff in there.

Yesterday, it was guy's choice evening, and they had chosen 'Full metal jacket'. It had seemed such a good idea at the moment.

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"I said atteeen-shun!" she yelled again at the gaping teens, which finally got the hint and assumed something akin to a straight stand.

"Today's lesson will be - Apparition! This is the instant teleportation to a desired location. It is a word and wandless skill, but roughly seventy percent of wizardkind can do it, so I expect you both to ace that skill, even though you don't know a Newt from a Hippogriff," Tonks shouted, and then fell silent, looking at them expectantly.

"I can't hear you Bundimuns!" she yelled at the top of her lungs.

Being used to harsher words aboard the ship, the teens shrugged and decided to play ball. "Ma'am, yes, Ma'am!" they both shouted back; Harry was smiling broadly while Hermione had never felt so stupid in her life, but played along.

"Now, that was at least decent, you keep that up and you might turn into Horklups someday," Tonks replied.

"Ma'am, thank you, Ma'am!" they chorused.

"Alright, now - Apparition," Tonks continued yelling, although the kids were only a few feet away. "This is the manual of how the Ministry of Magic would like me to teach you," she said, holding a thin booklet into the air. With a shrug, she tossed it over her shoulder, and over the cliff. Harry had to grab Hermione's arm to keep her from jumping after the book in reflex.

"You can read that for the written test - I'll teach you the way that really works. First, I'll side-along each of you a few times so you know how it feels," Tonks told them while pacing up and down in front of them, drawing two circles on the ground at their feet, and another pair a yard away. "Then you will try to recreate that feeling, just like your word- and wandless magic, while you concentrate on being inside the next circle. The only movement necessary is a turn. Understood, so far?"

"Ma'am, yes, Ma'am," the couple canted.

"Good. When doing this, keep your full attention on the target - will yourself being there and then unleash your magic. If you fail to concentrate properly, you will either fail completely, or flicker, or succeed partly. The last one is called splinching, which means that you leave some parts of you behind. This will be at least very annoying for you, and most entertaining for me. I can reverse that, but it will take time, and I won't hurry. I might even take a lunch break. So, a successful lesson for you means that you bore me to death," Tonks concluded, slapping her hands together and rubbing them eagerly.

Unsurprisingly, the lesson proved that Hermione had no problem at all to keep her focus. Harry did rather well for the first few tries, and due to his superior power got it right faster than Hermione, but then he got a bit overconfident and distracted at an attempt. It wasn't that bad - at least he could now claim that he had managed to lick his own elbow. Both women had rolled their eyes at him for doing and bragging about that, and Tonks had brained Harry with his own arm before reattaching it.

*** August 20th, Privet Drive 4 ***

Vernon Dursley frowned at the newspaper, taking another sip of his coffee. "Crooks and liars, all those politicians," he thought as he read about some new projects planned. Petunia carefully placed the plate with the scrambled eggs in front of her husband. He had snapped at her yesterday for setting the plate down too hard. She had also carefully mixed the eggs and ham, as he complained loudly about the uneven mix the day before. She hoped that the bad phase in his office would soon be over. Vernon was complaining all the time about how bad his co-workers were doing their jobs the last few days, and raved about how he had to yell at a few of them to get them to work properly. With all the stress at work, Vernon was a walking powder keg at home.

He even shouted at Dudley-poo last evening as the poor boy was inquiring if they could watch his favourite program instead of the boring news. Of course, she did not admit to herself this outburst had been entirely warranted, Dudley just couldn't do wrong. It was only fair that he had thrown a tantrum as the channel wasn't switched when he had demanded so. He had entirely not deserved and was completely disturbed by the sudden aggression. So, to avoid more incidents and keep her son pacified, she had sent her poor boy to spend the day over at his friend Piers.

She flinched when the doorbell rang during Vernon's breakfast. When the bell sounded, Vernon had scrunched up his newspaper. His head was already starting to colour when he lifted his mass out of the chair to answer the door. When he had done so, the bell rang again and Vernon's face turned purple as he stomped out into the hallway to shout at the early, unannounced visitor.

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"I'm coming! Stop that racket!" An angry voice was heard after Officer Matthew Dully had pressed the doorbell button for the third time. Shortly later, the door was jerked open and a massively overweight man came into view - at least the parts of him that weren't obscured by the rest of the house. Even those visible parts were twice as big as Dully's partners for today's business, Officer Charlene Morrisson. Officer Patrick Cheng, the third man for this search wasn't much bigger.

"What?" the fat man roared, before he noticed the uniforms on the visitors. "Would you care to explain yourself, Officers?" he said, in a slightly friendlier way, but only barely.

Dully just handed him a copy of the search warrant and waited a moment for the man to read the title. "Mister Dursley, we are here to search your house because of certain charges. Would you please step aside and let us proceed?" he asked in a very polite voice.

"This is an outrage!" the man raged, having read a bit more of the document by now. "You are here to check on charges made by that boy? What lies did he tell you?" Vernon roared, the vein on his temple pulsating rapidly.

"Nothing, this was brought to our attention by some medical professionals, and we are here to check up on the allegations. Would you please step aside to let us begin?" Matthew said, still trying to sound politely, but already believing some of the charges he was familiar with.

"Of course I will not! This is MY home! MY house! I won't have any of this!" Vernon bellowed.

"Sir, for the last time - please do step aside or you will be found in contempt of the warrant and we will be forced to arrest you," Matthew demanded forcibly, his patience wearing thin.

Vernon frowned fiercely and made the final mistake. He gave the man a shove.

Across the street and under an invisibility cloak, a certain teen and his girlfriend were straining the silencing charm a disillusioned Remus had cast on them to the breaking point while Harry's uncle was introduced to pepper spray and handcuffs. The warning wards they had placed a few days earlier, after the Grangers' deposition, had gone off during breakfast, and they had apparated in just in time to see the policemen approach the door. While the kids were still laughing at the officers trying to bring Harry's walrus-sized uncle under control, Remus vowed to have a serious word with the twins while the kids were off to their morning training with Tonks. Their Choleric Coffee was too dangerous to be made available to the wizarding public.

Three days later, Harry Potter-Black was declared officially under muggle guardianship of Mister and Misses Granger, of High Barnett. The party was loud, long and would have broken the Statute of Secrecy, if it weren't on a secluded island far away in the Caribbean.

ooOOoo

"Hermione? Could you spare a minute?" Harry said nervously as he approached his girl at the salad table near the pit Henry was burning meat beyond recognition, calling that process 'grilling'. Hermione's father already had a few beers too many, and the cooking was the first to suffer. Thankfully, they didn't need to tell him, as the elves were doing something to the coal pieces he handed out, making them edible again.

"Of course," Hermione said with a smile as she put her platter with cucumber salad down. Harry didn't like the taste of this dish at all, but he had made sure that they always had some of that particular dressing and vegetable in stock after he found out that Hermione was nearly addicted to that stuff. She had noticed the way Harry had been stealing glances at her all the evening, and was eager to find out what he would want from her.

Curiously, Hermione followed Harry a bit away from the party, where Harry pulled her into a hug. She nearly squeaked in surprise when he suddenly spun her around and disappeared them both away.

ooOOoo

Materializing in the lush jungle, Hermione took a moment to look around. She absently-minded noticed and named the various tropical plants around them on the small clearing, and the presence of a small streamlet. The sound from where it disappeared at the horizon and the lack of trees at that direction indicated that they were at the edge of Skull Beach, near the waterfall.

Of course, she had noticed the blanket and the basket lying near a fallen tree and sighed in disappointment. Still, she allowed Harry to lead her over to that place, where Harry turned her around and made her sit on the tree.

"While I appreciate the planning," she said with a smirk and a shake of her head, "I don't think this is the right time for that."

"Why not?" Harry said in a flabbergasted way.

"Because everybody is having a party down there," she said, pointing vaguely out towards the cliff.

"Well, yes," Harry fidgeted. "But I thought that it would be the perfect moment to do it, I even had Dobby prepare everything!" he said as he stepped closer and reached for her hands.

"It's a sweet idea, and a really romantic spot, but what will the others say if we steal ourselves away for something like that," Hermione insisted softly as she squeezed his hands in return.

"I don't care. They talk about all the plans and stuff, but I realized we all just assumed that it would happen in a certain way, and I didn't even bother to ask," he said sadly.

"Ask? Ask what?" Hermione inquired as she felt slightly confused and lost concerning where this conversation was leading to.

"Hermione, we have had many adventures already, and we know each other like no one else does. I have never asked for anything, but right now, I have to ask for the biggest favour you could ever do to me," Harry softly said, and Hermione's confusion gave way to a severe spell of dizziness when Harry dropped to a knee in front of her, still holding her hands.

"Hermione Jean Granger, would you make me the happiest man on earth and become my wife?"

ooOOoo

Down on the beach, two women exchanged knowing glances when suddenly a squealing scream sounded from across the bay, scaring some local birds into flight. Even though Harry had led Hermione away from the group before apparating, their disappearance and the state he had been in all the day hadn't been unnoticed, or unexpected.

While Tonks went to share the news with the bewildered Remus and the twins who were all wondering about the source of that scream; Margret thought it would be best to leave her husband oblivious for

the time being. She would tell him tomorrow, during hangover, she decided with a smirk at her party animal.

*** August 24th, the Headmaster's office, Hogwarts ***

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office, fighting his way through his paperwork. There was still no sign of the boy, and although he rather would continue searching, he had not the tiniest clue where to start. But he had procrastinated with the menial work that made up most of his job long enough already, even discounting the time he spent hunting after Potter, and he still had a school to run.

He looked up when a motion had caught his attention. With in the time it took him to look up, Hedwig had swooped into the office, turning hard and releasing her letter at the perfect moment to have the piece of parchment smack squarely into the wizard's face. Before the Headmaster had recovered from this surprise, the snowy owl had already left his office again, and was heading off into the distance, making barking sounds.

A bit annoyed but curious as well, he picked up the note, just in order to nearly drop it again as if it were on fire. With a wide open mouth he stared at the simple note, stating that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger would attend Hogwarts next term, if he agreed to keep out of their relationship. If he did promise to do so, he should send a note to the Daily Prophet, to have them print the simple statement 'I approve' in the personal ads tomorrow.

He frowned when the written note vanished from sight after being read, but he noticed the small notch in one of the corners of the parchment. This marked the parchment as Order message parchment - self deleting after being read by the recipient, or when someone else tried to read it. They used it to keep messages out of enemy hands when doing Order business - this was definitely Tonks' and Remus's work. He knew that there was no way to restore or track the message; these parchments were one of Filius' finest works.

Ignoring the small setback, he pondered the situation. It seemed that the boy had finally come to reason, and this was obviously only a petty ploy to make it look like he was still in control while he rushed back into the safety of Hogwarts embrace.

Albus briefly reminisced whether he should dismiss the demand and insist on total submission, but there was a slight chance that the boy might react stupid if he did so. After all, Albus was glad to have the boy back with as little as a simple promise.

After all, the demands weren't upsetting at all - he could deal with Potter having a different girlfriend than planned, especially since Miss Granger had a very good sense for the greater good. Miss Weasley had lately shown some selfish tendencies, which could prove to be a hindrance to the sad, but necessary things that would need to be done. The meek and pliable Miss Granger, on the other hand, had a habit to look up to authority figures that was nearly challenging Percival Weasley's obsession with power, which could be exploited.

Also, he wouldn't have to deal with Molly Weasley as much as he would have in the old scenario, which was a definitive bonus. After a bit of pondering, he realized that if the worst case should occur, he could also use Miss Granger as a bargaining chip against Mister Potter without too much outrage from the public. Yes, that small concession would actually make his plans much easier, especially as the boy didn't even demand an oath, but just a simple promise.

After all, what was a promise worth to a politician?

Smiling at the naivety of the boy and his friends, Dumbledore wrote a note to the specified content and called an elf to send it to the newspaper via Hogwarts owl.

After the elf had popped out, Dumbledore went to find his Deputy and Severus. He had good news to share.

ooOOoo

Debby Cornwall, the clerk at the Daily Prophet Announcements Desk, took the note from the tawny owl and opened it. She couldn't understand to what the Supreme Mugwump wanted to have his approval printed in the next edition, but that wasn't her job. She only had to take these ads and place them. Shrugging her shoulders, she looked for an appropriate place on the page and copied the content of the note onto it.

When Harry Potter and his entourage showed up at her desk a few hours later, and proclaimed they would like to announce his engagement to the girl next to him, her first reaction was to nearly faint and thusly, she was too shocked to draw the connection. But when Mister Potter had asked her if his guardian, Mister Dumbledore - who sadly was indisposed at the moment and near future due to his multitude of functions - had already sent the necessary note of approval to the Daily Prophet, as promised, she remembered and retrieved the strange note, handing it over as demanded.

As soon as the group had paid the three Sickles fee for that kind of announcement, she put the ad on the corresponding page and sent copies of the marriage contract and the permission slips from the guardians - along with the necessary Sickle - to the Ministry's Registry, and - including thirteen Knuts - to the Gringotts customer relationships office, making it official. This procedure had become standard in the last century, in order to make announcements watertight and to keep contracts from going missing.

After the group had left her office, the next thing she did was to take another copy upstairs to the Editor. Although she didn't like the man too much, she wore a genuine smile as she entered his office, since this was the kind of announcement she got paid extra for relaying it directly to him.

ooOOoo

The next morning edition of the Daily Prophet featured a huge headline of "THE BOY WHO PROPOSED!" - along with a photo of Harry and Hermione below, a re-run of a photo used by Rita Skeeter years ago, in her article about Hermione's alleged love triangle with Harry and Victor Krum. Coincidentally, Rita would be next to unbearable for the next few weeks, basking in her skill as reporter for being the first to report on this. The story and background info filled a whole third of the paper, as the end of summer left them with little else to report. Other papers would quickly pick up the story and run it as well, each with their own slant and varying approval of their relationship.

While the whole magical society was in uproar about the news, Dumbledore wasn't exactly happy when he read the Headline that would fuel gossip for days or weeks. A quick glance into the article

showed him that he had been tricked like a school kid. There was a contract submitted, and it was even paid already. This meant that Potter was legally his own man and had access to the Black vaults.

'This practically reeks of Lupin, I'd bet one of my names on it,' the old man mulled as he grudgingly had to pay respect to that man's plan. 'At least, the article states that Harry will really return to Hogwarts. Let's see how he will fare without their help,' Dumbledore thought with a serene smile, his eyes twinkling. Soon, the boy would come around and accept the wisdom of his elders again.

ooOOoo

Meanwhile in Devon, all birds in a small town near a river took flight and left the area as a loud shriek pierced the peaceful quiet there.

ooOOoo

AN:

"Okay, I planted the sign," an approaching embirsiphonelilathia said with a shake of her head and a smile as she pointed out a rock to DerLaCroix. Within a few moments, DerLaCroix had moved it onto the sling.

"Seems to work, the minions are assembling around it; what did you write on it?" he asked as DerLaCroix made the last corrections, according to the stone's weight.

"To get stoned, wait here," embirsiphonelilathia giggled as DerLaCroix pulled the lever, and watched the stone fly as the catapult swung clear.

ooOOoo

Sweet memories... I actually managed to hit one of my guests with the catapult I use to lob foam cubes in the air for them to hit in the 'Archery skeet tournament' I held last week, while they were retrieving their arrows... It wasn't worse than getting smacked with a pillow... At least the foam cube was soaked in water...

I think you all know now why Harry isn't going to a different school. And no, this is not in reply to the reviews, it was planned to happen

like that long ago... I just went slightly overboard with the length of this chapter.

I promise, it won't happen again... *smiles evilly*

Sorry for the long delay, but things have spun out of control lately, and I am hiring a lawyer as we speak to get the upper hand again. My beta was experiencing troubles, as well, so everything went kind of SNAFU on us.

Stories will continue, but no promises on schedule, as life takes precedence for now.

Singled out minions:

Purple Artichokes from Mars (Where the hell did you get that name from?):

I know the command was a bit wordy, but remember that there were more land-lubbers than experienced sailors aboard the Pathfinder back then, so they had to spell it out for Harry's companions – it WAS a training ride, and their first, after all...

Jeff:

My problem with fight scenes is that they usually last too long. If you ever were in a real fight, you should know that it usually is over within seconds. I hate it when people write fights where a dozen people exchange curses for about half an hour without anybody hitting shit. That might happen in a one on one duel, but with increasing number of participants it will quickly turn into a chaos of spells flying everywhere. Sorry if you expected style over substance fighting, but I prefer realistic scenarios...

Also, Tonks had barely the time to teach them which end of the wand is the dangerous one - the ministry battle would have gone a lot different if the DE didn't hold back.

No, my Harry is no god-like reincarnation of a super warrior, like most make him to be - he is a competent fighter with a few aces in the sleeve.

Chapter 16: Return to the home shore

"Severus!" a raspy, hissing voice called out suddenly.

The man in question nearly dropped the ancient tome he was currently reading and hurried to the source of the call.

"Yes, Master?" he asked as he bowed, his eyes cast downwards. He wouldn't dare to look at his Lord without being told to. The Dark Lord was rather easily irritated these days.

"I need your... skills... for a second resurrection ritual. I found that there was a small, but critical... flaw... with the timing of my first resurrection," Voldemort admitted, wheezing slightly as he seemed to struggle for air. Snape cringed lightly. The Dark Lord was generous with punishment for others when a mistake was made, and not particularly selective in who to receive it.

"Your wisdom knows no equal, my Lord. How may my insignificant skills serve you in this ritual?" he grovelled, carefully to paint himself as inferior to his master.

"Yes, yes, I know, Severus." The Dark Lord waved his hand in the air, his gesture flippant, dismissing the compliment as insignificant nuisance. "Since we now know that," he told his servant, pausing to take a deep breath, "Potter will be attending Hogwarts, I have already taken care of the preparations for that particular ritual - it will be perfect," the Dark Lord concluded. As he spoke, his face curled into a smirk of superiority before he ended in a raspy cackle. Severus carefully schooled his face into a stony mask of reverence at his master's 'brilliant plan'.

"Nothing less would to be expected from you, Master. Only fate and failures of your servants made your first try less than perfect," Snape replied devotedly, bowing deep but still wondering what exactly he had been called for.

"Stop grovelling, Severus. I need you to procure these ingredients," the Dark Lord snapped, but then he trailed off, his eyes glazing slightly at the thought of his plan, though he snapped back to attention and glared at his underling as if he were to blame. "And be prepared for this potion to be brewed at a moment's notice!" the Dark Lord hissed, handing Snape a roll of parchment, before

continuing his monologue. "This time, I must make sure that Dumbledore doesn't interfere. Send for the boy! I have a mission for him..."

August 27th, Grimmauld Place #12, about 10 o'clock

"Ok, kids! We'll stay close together, both of you to the front and the Grangers in the middle," Tonks snapped at her charges. "Remus and I will take up the rear. I don't expect any problems, but remember your portkeys. If something happens, the Grangers jump first, then you kids and then us two. Don't linger around on the front steps, go straight in," Tonks gave the motivational speech in front of the fireplace.

She didn't exactly expect an incident to happen - as the elves had only to dispose of a meagre dozen or two Howlers over the last days, it seemed that their announcement had been taken well by the public.

On the other hand, all of them were rather nervous about their trip to the wizarding world, anyway, and she was a firm exponent of the 'better safe than sorry'- rule.

When she had received a round of acknowledging nods in return, she grabbed the Floo powder pot and held it out.

"Ok, Margret with me, Henry with Remus. Hold tight and keep your eyes closed. Take a step forward once the spinning stops or you will be thrown out of the receiving fireplace," Tonks reminded the two Muggles again about how to use a Floo properly. They had never before used a fireplace as a mode of travel and were understandably nervous about doing so.

"It would have been nice if somebody had told me that trick some time ago," Harry whispered under his breath, much to everyone's amusement, and only half in jest.

"And miss the show? Why should we have?" Remus chuckled with a broad grin. Harry smiled back and flipped him the two-fingered salute, provoking a mandatory retaliation.

After the necessary niceties had been exchanged, Harry's hair was returned to its normal unruly state and black colour, and Remus's

tutu was transfigured back into his robes. Next, the teens grabbed some Floo powder and stepped into the fire, first Harry, and then Hermione.

Harry stepped out of the hearth with a firm step, rather proud to be able to exit with grace for once. Hermione was close behind him and gracefully took his offered hand as she niftily stepped over the grate and into the Leaky Cauldron.

While they waited in the full pub, Harry inconspicuously adjusted his battlewand in his waist holster across his belly. Henry had joked about him being a Texas Ranger when he first saw that thing. In order to hide it, Hermione and he had carved a lot of runes into the leather -which were charged by Harry - making the notice-me-not charms extremely strong, but he still was nervous if they would hold up against other people.

His other wand, which Lenny had redone to be crooked, too - since it would be stupid to have two wands so completely different in handling - was in a wrist holster under his left sleeve. Harry had chosen to keep it because his battlewand just didn't do 'subtle', and thus wasn't useful in normal life. Vaporizing the tea or slamming things into walls instead of heating and carefully levitating were just two examples of what this thing did. As long as the spell didn't use a figurative shipload of power, Harry looked like Neville in first year when using it. His regular wand was much more responsive, but most of the time, Harry just used wandless magic for small things nowadays, much to Hermione's barely suppressed envy.

Both of them took a few steps to the side, making room for the others to arrive and drawing the patrons' looks away from the fireplace. Of course, all eyes were riveted to them, following their every move in fascination of the most prominent couple these days. Normally, Harry would be uncomfortable with that, but today it turned out to be quite useful.

A few moments later, the adult wizards arrived, each holding tightly onto the Muggle they were transporting. They expertly took a step to avoid falling and separated smoothly from their charges, as to not draw too much attention to the double flooing. This would have pointed them out as Squibs or Muggles, and they didn't want to rise unneeded attention. To this end, the Grangers wore black robes, similar to the simple black robes Harry and Hermione had donned,

so even if people would notice and find it strange, they would only figure them to be squibs.

With everyone assembled, Harry and Hermione led the way out to the Alley, all eyes following them. Both winced involuntary as they heard the noise in the pub jump an order of magnitude, even before the door fell shut completely.

Walking around, they once more marvelled at the sounds and sights of a place that had become dear to them when they young. Strolling along hand in hand, Hermione and Harry enjoyed the outing, although it meant more than just a bit more trouble for Tonks and Remus, trying their best to shield the kids from all the folk trying to get some curious glances at them. The Grangers were rather surprised at the amount of attention the kids received, they heard about Harry being famous, but this definitely proved it. Only the fact that they had two bodyguards around them kept people from asking for autographs.

Their first stop was - who would have expected it - the bookstore.

Within minutes, Hermione's arms were laden with books. Not only the books for sixth and seventh year for all of her subjects, but many more about various runic and arithmetic theoretical topics. While the Black Library contained dozens of volumes about advanced runes and wards so nasty that you could get sick from just reading what they'd do, it sorely lacked the basic theory needed to actually understand and apply them.

Harry first thought about only taking this year's books, but then also took some extras, about healing and household stuff, which he had missed in the Black Library, and some books on warding. In learning magic, he was always more interested in practical uses and deduced the theory from them. Working with runes proved that trait. When he - finally - knew a rune, like with spells, he could usually quickly deduct other uses for it when a quick fix was needed. Of course, Hermione always knew a better way to do so, as she tended to memorize patterns by rote and combined these patterns for the needed application, but this usually used twice as many runes for the same effect, while Harry's ideas had only a few runes, which weren't as spot on in their effect, but used less power.

Of course, he would be unable to do things like the shark ward Hermione had tried to design, yet; but both agreed that once Harry had a bit more instruction, his 'artistic' approach would make him surpass Hermione in that field one day, maybe even become a famous enchanter. Harry was very glad that he had found something he was good in that didn't include fighting. It didn't hurt that he was a walking runic battery, allowing him to charge new patterns all day long while not tiring from the effort. A normal enchanter managed a handful of projects a day, at most.

A few minutes later, Harry had left a fortune at the till and all books were packed and sent off with the help of Dobby. Harry had put his divination training to good use and had told him beforehand to wait for them at the shop, well aware of the amount of books Hermione would buy. Harry had been whispering something to the small guy before he disappeared, but Hermione didn't pay any attention to it, already engrossed in some other books she had noticed on her way out.

Ignoring the crowd in front of the store, most of them not even pretending to do window shopping instead of stalking them, they continued their tour. Remus proved very helpful in that endeavour. In the series of articles, he had been mentioned, and was probably the most widely known werewolf in Britain right now. When he took the lead and put a bodyguard-glare on, the crowd parted quickly.

Tonks took her assignment very serious, as well. Nobody came even close to Hermione's parents.

Evading the crowd, they took a quick stop at Madame Malkin's for robes, which Harry insisted to be of the better quality, and a slightly better cut for Hermione's, not completely for altruistic reasons. He certainly liked the way the cut brought out her astonishing figure, as he told her. Hermione considered him mad for finding her body shape to be at all attractive, but if he liked it, she would certainly not try to change his mind.

Although Fortescue's was just across the street they didn't want to stop there, since they knew about the possible vulnerabilities a visit there would present. Especially with all the bystanders hanging about, peeking into their cups. It showed the state that Voldemort was in, with no attacks happening to send the citizens into panic.

They briefly considered a stop at Gringotts, to look at the Grangers' new vault, but since the Goblins had confirmed the transfer of the bride price from the Black vault already, it seemed a needless exposure. Hermione still was in a quandary. At the one hand, she felt like she should be mad for essentially being sold off into marriage, but on the other hand, Harry insisted that she was worth ten times the usual sum and more.

In the end, the Grangers had managed to haggle Harry down to a 'local phone number' sum, which managed to get the Grangers set up for retirement in one swoop. Hermione chose to believe that this was the primary reason, and accepted the compliment, knowing that according to Tonks, the price was the most important thing to make the contract airtight. It also didn't escape her notice that this was also a blow into the face of purebloods, as even the Malfoys paid less than a fifth for a bride out of the House of Black. As bride price equaled status and value, it was a provocation, stating that she was worth five purebloods.

So instead, they continued down the street until they found the twin's shop. To be fair, it was impossible to overlook. The whole building was a gigantic display of flashing colours, and the windows contained goods that were bouncing, spinning - and Harry could have sworn that one of those hats had just eaten some kind of ball that rolled by. People all around were staring at the display, and even more were staring at a huge poster advertising something called U-NO-POO with a very bad joke at the Dark Lord's expense. Tonks found it hilarious.

When they entered, they found real pandemonium. Children were running around, yelling, parents either chasing after them, or just standing guard around the door, having given up ever catching their offspring. The shelves were packed, and two witches in garish pink robes were restocking them. Strike that, now those robes were an canary yellow with green polka dots that made your eyes protest against the abuse.

Over the racket, they could see the twins in the background. It was rather easy to spot them. As soon as your eyes watered, you could be sure they were in sight, along with the abomination they called robes they wore to work. As both of them were rather busy managing the shoppers, the group chose to take a look around and meet them later.

So they crossed the room, looking at the various tricks, sweets and trick wands, until they reached the less frequented part of the shop, with various games. Everyone grabbed boxes on occasion, reading the description on the back and putting them down again. Carefully, of course, as all of them knew that the twins' products always were implied to handle with care.

"Harry!" Fred suddenly called out from behind them. Hermione jumped and nearly dropped a box she was reading.

"Figures that you would like one of these," Fred chuckled as he picked it up and handed it back to her, with a short glimpse at the cover. At Harry's questioning eyebrow, Hermione's face gained a few shades of colour as she turned it around for him to see. Harry guffawed as he saw a picture of a girl and a man on a pirate ship.

"To our defence, we had these particular 'Patented Day-dreams in a box' in stock since early July. You want one, Hermione? Or is the reality enough?" Fred joked. "You can have that for free," he continued with a laugh when Hermione turned crimson, but held onto the box while nodding. Harry shook his head and gave his girlfriend a hug.

"Feel free to rummage about", Fred told them, before taking a hold of Harry's arm. "You might be interested in something at the back of the shop," he told him. "We have the first two Adventure Dreams ready for sale already, you should see how the people are all over them!" he crooned, and led Harry away, while Hermione continued to scan the 'girly' merchandise.

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After the couple had split to rummage a bit through the goods, a sudden cry of "Hermione!" sounded in the shop.

Turning around, Hermione saw Ron approaching quickly, a huge smile on his face. She called out for Harry and happily approached her red-haired friend, and hugged him. The hug was crushing, and to her surprise, it was part of a package. When they separated, Ron did something unexpected. He grabbed Hermione's head and kissed her, hard.

Petrified, Hermione stood ramrod still as Ron sucked on her face, slobbering all over her tightly closed lips, trying to gain entry. It took a second before her brain reconnected with reality and she pushed him away, wiping her face with her sleeve in disgust.

"Ron! What are you doing?" She spat, while Harry approached them, looking fit to spit nails. Another quick look and a wave of her hand were enough to make Tonks stand down and spare Ron's life. Still, when Harry arrived, he hugged her close immediately and glared daggers at Ron.

Their redheaded friend took one look at them and switched into prat-mode, looking like he would blow up any second. "You're with Harry, aren't you?" he asked angrily, proving that he didn't read papers, except for the sports page. After all, their engagement had only been the headline for three days...

"How could you?" Ron yelled suddenly, and Harry instinctively shoved Hermione behind his back, shielding her. "You knew that I had feelings for her! What kind of friend are you?" he spat at Harry.

Harry was taking his friend's outburst with relative calm. It wasn't as if he didn't have any experience with that kind of behaviour. Usually, it was the best to just ignore it and carry on, and Ron would turn around at some point. Harry knew that Ron would need to speak one or two more things before his brain would reengage and make him back off or apologize. This time, Harry wasn't inclined to let it come this far. His patience had limits, and Ron had reached those. But as it seemed at the moment, Ron had already successfully exceeded those of Hermione, again.

"What? Do you think you got any claim on me? Didn't it occur to you that I might not be interested in you?" she yelled and stepped in front of Harry, her hands on her hip and a scowl on her face.

"That's not the point!" Ron yelled back, either missing or dismissing Hermione's point completely, and turning back to yell at Harry. "A real friend wouldn't steal a girl. I thought you were my friend, Harry!"

Hermione finally had enough. "He can't steal a girl you never had! I do not want anything from you, Ronald Weasley, and I never will. I'm not some kind of commodity you can reserve, trade or barter with other guys, I'm a human being. If you want to own something, try

that!" she yelled, and threw some random box at Ron, hitting him on the head, before storming off, missing the spectacular iridescent forehead Ron now sported.

Harry fought down the urge to follow her immediately and instead waited a few seconds, just to be sure that Ron won't do something stupid - okay, even more stupid. Much to his relief, Ron just stood there for a few moments, sputtering in some powerless rage before he vanished into the crowd. Harry couldn't help but shake his head in disbelief at the behaviour of his friend as he went to look for his girl.

A few moments, and a discrete wave and point by Tonks later, he found Hermione a few aisles further, where she had met Ginny, next to some strange wiggling balls of fur. Both girls were petting one of those things, each, obviously the only thing those creatures were good for. When Harry approached, Ginny noticed him first and gave him a sad smile.

"I have heard you already met my jerk of a brother," she said with a sad voice, while Hermione's whatever that thing was named started squeaking instead of purring as she nearly petted that poor animal to death. Harry had pity with the poor thing and carefully took it away from Hermione and put it back into its perch, before he embraced his girlfriend, with Ginny patting her back.

"Yeah, he has a gift when it comes to say the most hurtful thing possible," Harry agreed. "So, how are you? Any news that a Dark Lord in the making should know?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Oh, right - Potter turning dark. You should pull the other one, Harry - it's got bells on it!" Ginny snorted. "Really - that's ridiculous! But just so you got something to blackmail me with - I'm with Dean; he's such a great guy! We started dating last term, and he was writing me every week," Ginny happily told them before turning serious, some old news for them, but Ginny couldn't know that the twins were in contact with Harry all the time.

"Mum tried to talk me out of it all summer, for some reason she thinks he's not right for me and I should pursue you instead," she admitted. At this admission, Hermione's head shot up, swivelling around to look at her best girlfriend in shock.

"Come on, don't be silly, Hermione," Ginny laughed. "While he's not too bad, after all the time we spent in the Burrow and in school, Harry seems more of a brother than anything else to me," Ginny said, tightening her hug on Hermione a bit. "And especially the fact that Mum wants to push me into dating him means it's never going to happen," she laughed with a glint of defiance in her eyes.

Hermione and Harry couldn't help to laugh at their rebellious friend, who once more grew serious.

"Speaking of mum, you better leave before my parents show up," she whispered at them while scanning the room. "We're just visiting here while they're getting some money from the vault. Hermione surely doesn't need another fight today, and especially mum is bound to yell at you two when she sees you. She burnt the newspaper with your announcement on the spot, I only heard about that later from Luna. Congratulations on that, by the way."

Harry smiled sadly at her, nodding to show his appreciation. "See you on the Express?" he asked, looking around in search for Hermione's parents. Tonks interpreted his glances correctly from her vantage point, and pointed towards the entrance, where Henry demonstrated some Muggle magic tricks from a shelf located there to Remus. He thanked her with a quick nod before returning his attention to the girls next to him.

"Yeah, see you at the Express. Keep a seat for me; I'll be arriving fashionably late, as usual," Ginny laughed and left, waving goodbye as Harry led Hermione away to their companions.

Tonks tailed them, and when they joined the group, Margret immediately noticed Hermione's expression. With discretion that only a woman could possess, Margret had Hermione whisked away a few paces and both were talking in hushed tones. Well, mostly hushed ones from her and more than a few hissed ones from Hermione.

"What happened?" Remus asked Harry in a hushed voice, trying not to agitate the girl even more.

"Nothing new - Ron's an asshole," Harry sighed as he warily eyed his girlfriend hissing in an extremely angry tone at her mother, telling

her the story. He didn't have to hear her to know when exactly she hissed the name 'Ron'. Every time she did, she looked like somebody had caused her to be thrown out of the library. Come to think of it, Ron had actually managed that once, back in third year.

"What did he do now? I never saw her that angry before, not even when they weren't talking for weeks in third year," Remus asked while he had another wary glance at the girl. He could smell her anger from where he stood.

"He was of the opinion that since he wanted Hermione, I should have ignored her. And he didn't think her opinion in that matter counted, at least it sounded like that. I can't believe what a jerk he has become," Harry answered, and Remus winced. Tonks just shook her head in disgust. She found that Ron had gotten away lightly – they still hadn't found all the parts of the last guy who tried to pull that stunt with her. Although it is pretty sure that he'll never dance again.

"People do change, Harry. At least Ron is only a jealous prat: Peter was once a nice guy, too - and then he went and betrayed your parents. Give him some time; most guys are a bit unreasonable at your age, especially if it's about girls. He'll grow up, eventually," Remus said as he put his arm around Harry's shoulders.

"I wouldn't pin my hopes on that happening in Ron's case, but let's try being optimistic," Harry told Remus as Hermione walked over, still at the brink of tears.

"Take me home!" she pleaded, and so he did. A second later, the portkey whisked them away, and he didn't stop at the stairs, instead he swooped her up and carried her through the door and directly up into their room.

It took them four hours to return, her face still blotched. Instead of an explanation, they just led all people to the study, to spend the last few days on the island, instead.

*** September 1st, London, King's cross ***

Being early at platform 9 ¾ made Harry discover a possible reason for the Weasleys to always be late. Except for the utter chaos that

reigned at the Burrow as each child was packing his trunk at the last second. The pushing and shoving was horrible.

It made the early morning packing at the Burrow seem sedate and orderly in comparison. More than once, they were tempted to grab the elder Grangers and use their Portkey necklaces when someone appeared too close nearby.

All over the place were people talking and greeting each other, children were running around, trying to find their friends, mothers corralling younger children, and baggage trolleys were performing their own version of stock-car racing.

"Reminds me of Heathrow in summer," Henry remarked dryly, "just a bit quieter," he spoke over the occasional apparition pops or Portkey flashes that completed the ear-splitting din.

Remus and Tonks had just side-along apparated Hermione's parents onto Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ while Hermione and Harry had pushed their trolleys through. Crookshanks was hissing and snarling angrily at the sudden noise waking him so rudely. He had been dealing with the shame of being in his carrier by sleeping through the degrading process. Being awake did not improve his mood. He couldn't believe that his servants had really returned to that cold place. They were in a warm, sunny place, a place with fish! Fish swimming in water, waiting to be caught! Why on earth would anyone want to leave there?

Harry had cleverly avoided the trouble with an irritated familiar by sending Hedwig off to fly to Scotland on her own. It was the better deal for all persons concerned.

Walking to wards the train, with Tonks and Remus trying to create a path for them, there was the occasional stop-and-stare incident, which was to be expected after the article announcing their engagement. Harry had even finally managed to give Hermione an engagement ring.

He had originally planned to do that with a surprise visit to Gringotts on their last Diagon Alley visit, right after the visit to the twin's shop. He had even thought ahead and had sent Dobby there to make an appointment. But then, circumstances had led to meeting Ron, and

this to Hermione crying, which had lead to their day of shopping cut short.

In the end he had to ask Dobby to inform the Goblins and to get him all rings present in his vaults for Hermione to choose at home, instead. The Goblins acknowledged his wishes, but charged him an hour for the appointment, anyway.

Out of the wide range of available rings - all out of the Black vault and twice checked for curses by Remus - Hermione had chosen a rather simple ring with a - relatively - small diamond on it, claiming that the other 'rocks' would look stupid on her small hands, and that she wouldn't want to be seen as gold-digger.

A 'modest' two carat was alright with her.

If looks were being interpreted correctly, Remus would have to top this feat to stay in Tonk's good graces. He was lucky that Harry was already resolved to help his 'uncle' out if came to this, eventually.

In fact, the ring pleased Hermione enough that she didn't shed too many tears over her beloved prefect badge. She had sent it back to McGonagall a few days ago, citing differences with the Headmaster and her class load as reasons for not being able to fill that position anymore. Of course, another reason was that she didn't want to make rounds with Ron while Harry was waiting for her in the common room. So yes, the ring gave her something to focus on, so that her hand didn't move to the place where the badge hung all too often.

Henry and Margret were meanwhile fascinated with the mass of strange clad wizards and witches around them. All those years, they had said goodbye in front of the charmed wall, and therefore only seen a hint at a small fraction of the wizarding world. But this was the real thing.

They pushed further through the crowd clogging the entrance area and into the clearer portions of the platform, nearer to the train itself. Henry was fascinated by the scarlet steam engine. Noticing the lack of coal and a water tower on the platform, he immediately was involved in a conversation with his daughter and wife about how that train actually worked and why no one ever had noticed it or the tracks leading to Hogwarts.

Hermione was of course more than eager to educate her father, and started pointing out things to him and her mother. Harry found himself quickly falling back behind them as his girlfriend, now betrothed, was nearly dragging her parents along and talking a mile a minute. Looking around, he couldn't keep from sighing.

"What's wrong, boss?" Tonks quipped from the side, still scanning the crowd like the professional she was. Remus turned around in wonder; he hadn't even picked up the bad mood Harry was in.

"Everything?" Harry responded rhetorically - and whiny. Knowing that this won't satisfy his lead bodyguard, he took a deep breath to continue. "The whole situation bothers me. I'd rather not have anything to do with the old coot, but without him, I have no clue how to deal with the coot that won't die. I'd love to see my friends again, but since Ron's turning out being an asshole, I'm not really tickled about that, anymore. This sucks, and it sucks double that I have no choice. Right now, only Hermione is keeping me going," he moped, and glared at Tonks as she nearly choked on a stifled laugh at his last words.

"Shut it, Dora - I'm not in the mood. Not at all, I'd rather just want to smash something badly," he growled. Tonks parried by briefly changing her face into that of Dumbledore, Snape and Ron in turn. "Yeah, any of them would be appreciated. I don't suppose you offer being a dummy for me?"

"Harry, Harry," Remus chided from her other side. "Dora might be clumsy, but she is no dummy."

When Tonks beamed at her man for that compliment, albeit backhanded, Remus couldn't resist teasing her. "Sloppy in writing," he added, starting to tick off items on his fingers, "messy in the house, useless in kitchen, bad taste in clothing, ouch!"

"Violent, too," Harry deadpanned after Tonks had cuffed Remus around the ear. Her steely you-will-be-next look found him immediately. Harry just smiled back at her innocently, blowing her a kiss.

"Only the fact that it would look unprofessional if I spank my boss is saving you right now," she hissed with her narrowed eyes trying to

burn him to a crisp, but couldn't keep the facade up for very long, before all three of them started laughing.

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After killing time by chatting about various things of no consequence with Tonks, Harry found that it would be the right time for them to board the train, in order to find a compartment. The crowd was already slowly filtering into the train, and there were only so many compartments available.

Looking around, he found the Grangers standing near the pistons at the train's main wheels, Hermione pointing out various things, probably runes. Remus already stood inconspicuously nearby, watching over them. A small nod to Tonks was enough to make his intentions clear, and both started to walk over to them. With Tonks clearing a path for him, Harry leisurely followed, grinning at the surprise he had for Hermione, coming the start of classes.

He had nearly reached them when he was stopped by a well known voice behind him. It was drawling something that made Hermione and her parents gasp, Remus growl; Tonks grip her wand and Harry wishing that he had worn his rapier instead of stowing it in the trunk.

"What are those filthy Muggles doing over there? Don't you know that you are only allowed to bring one pet to Hogwarts, Potter?"

Malfoy, with his merry gang of junior Death Eaters chuckled as Harry froze mid-step. For a moment, Tonks played with the thought of interfering, just to blow the smirk of her idiot cousin's face. But being safe in the knowledge that Harry could deal with a dozen of his classmates with ease, and was in the proper mood to do so, she refrained from doing so.

In fact, she was kind of curious what Harry was able to do after the wringer she had dragged the children through. Of course, she had mocked them by calling it 'basic training' while she would have struggled to pull through it, herself.

Still, she stepped a bit to the side, shielding the Grangers in case it came to blows, and checking the surroundings. It could be a ruse, after all. Hermione and Remus did about the same, waiting how the situation would play out, but ready to guard Harry's back if needed.

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This was the moment Draco had been waiting for a few days already. When they had gotten a formal Gringotts letter addressed to Narcissa Malfoy, he first was at loss what kind of business these filthy Goblins would have with his mother. When she proclaimed that it came from the Family Line Management Office, his face brightened considerably as his mouth formed into a smirk. Wondering who of his huge family had keeled over and made them their heir, he waited as his mother opened the envelope.

When his mother read the letter, he was barely able to catch her when she blanched and fainted during the read. Placing her back onto the couch she had sat before the letter had arrived, he carefully approached the letter, not sure whether he was supposed to read it or not. Ok, he actually was insecure about if he was able to get away with it, no Malfoy cared much about privacy of correspondence. Well, other people's correspondence...

Bowing over the parchment, careful not to touch it, he scanned the letter, his eyes only lingered on some remarkable points.

... According to the wishes of Lord Potter-Black... That gave him a most painful stab to the heart. He had known from early age on that he was in line to become the next Lord Black. He only had to wait for the mongrel to die in Askaban for the deal to be perfect.

Trust that trice-dammed blood traitor Sirius Black to take what was rightfully his and give it to that Halfblood scar-head Potter. His father had spent a small fortune on his lawyers to find a way to overturn that will, but it was watertight. They tried to argument that a Halfblood couldn't be Head to an ancient House, but according to the by-laws, the only restriction on what person could be Head of House was that he had to be born to a wizard and a witch. Sadly, even though Potter would be deemed a Halfblood by having a Muggleborn bitch as mother nowadays, the ancient bylaws of House Black recognized him as pure enough.

... to inform you of the expulsion of a Bellatrix (Black) Lestrangle from the Black family...

His first reaction was outrage at the injustice done. His second was a fearful wince when he realized the reaction of his aunt when she would hear that news. This would be a good time to be away from the mansion. Far away.

He read a bit further, into the actual statement of Potter, and came to a full stop. For a few long moments his breath ceased. He even forgot to blink. This couldn't be true. Potter couldn't be that brazen. Not even that jerk would be that suicidal stupid.

... forced to take these steps after Bellatrix had the audacity to attack me and my company with intent to harm in broad daylight. I would have been magnanimous to let this pass with a censure instead of expulsion, in the light of her fractured mental state, but looking into the bylaws, it turned out that the case was more serious than I had realized.

It is a well known fact that she has besmirched the honour of the House Black by committing multiple serious crimes as a member of a band of thugs, known as 'Death Eaters'.

While this is grave enough on its own, it's also not necessarily ground for expulsion.

But according to the horribly outdated section on appropriate blood status - which I will revise to abandon this as soon as I am of age - she also committed blood treason by prostrating herself to, and even allowed having herself branded like a farm animal by a lowly Halfblood, Tom Riddle Junior, who leads that criminal organisation under his pseudonym of 'Lord Voldemort', which mandates immediate expulsion.

Thusly, according to the current bylaws of House Black, I am regrettably obliged to expel her from the House Black.

May your gold always flow,

Lord Harry Potter-Black...

It was insane - the Dark Lord would flay him alive!

When it dawned on Draco that his family, as the messengers, would also have to bear the consequences, his eyes rolled up into his head as well, as he slumped into welcome oblivion.

ooOOoo

Draco made a satisfied chuckle at the successful baiting when Potter had finished his face-about and glared at them in turn. That chuckle slowly died when a literal wave of disdain washed over him, while all chatter in the imminent surroundings ceased.

It was the perfect glower.

The curl of the lips, the angle the head was held, the sheer unbelievably perfect mixture of scorn and hate in that cold, calculating look, delivered through eyes hard as emeralds, lit from behind with malice and power as his stare seemed to bore through them.

Snape would have killed to look half as menacing as Potter did now.

"Auror Tonks - has this child just dared to insult the family of my betrothed?" Harry pressed through his teeth.

Tonks needed a moment to reassess the situation. With a smile, she gave answer. "Yes, Lord Potter-Black. This was most definitely an insult." Malfoy flinched briefly when she addressed Harry by his title, but he kept on glowering at Harry for the perceived insult of being labelled a child by someone younger than him.

While his companions were clearly intimidated by Potter's poise, Draco was no person to back down. The concept of quitting while he still was behind - but also still alive - was an alien concept to him; either a Malfoy trait, or a result of inbreeding, but who cared. He was about to open his mouth to present the audience with another, probably as witty remark as his first had been, when he was interrupted.

"Am I right in the assumption that this gives me the right to chastise this spoilt brat properly?" Harry asked in the same voice, his anger sizzling just below the surface.

Draco's eyes widened even before Tonks replied sweetly, "Yes, Lord Potter-Black."

Right then, he had realized that Potter had not just stalled, but taken steps to justify his following actions. Legally, Potter was now allowed to use magic on them, while they would be in big trouble if they pulled a wand, as school wasn't in session, yet.

Potter's mouth curled into a satisfied sneer Draco's godfather would have been proud of as he replied with a single, silky word.

"Good."

With an almost satisfied sigh, Harry let loose of his just barely held in check magic. Immediately, his cloak started billowing on its own accord as the air became static, and within a few moments, the berth the audience had given them had almost doubled when people were nearly knocking each other over in order to get out of the immediate line of fire.

Draco was forced to correct his assessment of the situation. This wasn't anywhere close to like it was supposed to be. He should be the one with witty comments, angering Potter, who would only gnash his teeth and stare back angrily, but helpless. He had heard some laughable claims of fellow Death Eaters that Potter had grown impressively powerful over the summer, but Draco had been convinced that Potter had just been lucky in these encounters, and feats of others were attributed to him.

Faced with the sight of a seriously pissed Potter radiating magic like there was no tomorrow, his stunned disbelief petrified him long enough for the cowards in his entourage to buckle.

It all began with Pansy taking a step sideways, hiding behind her precious Draco. The fact that she hadn't baited Hermione even once spoke volumes about her level of intimidation by Potter's cold glare. She knew, beyond any doubt, that any insult she were able to utter would be a straight ticket to a world of pain.

Then, Crabbe slowly backed off, followed by Goyle, both proving to at least possess the basic instinct that tells an animal that there is a bigger predator than them present. Malfoy obviously lacked that necessary survival sense.

The breaking point was when Harry drew his wand in a quick and no-nonsense way.

Seeing that she had only Draco between her and Potter, and that the latter had currently no business with her, Pansy correctly summed up the situation and threw herself around and into the train. The retreat of a pack mate triggered the flight instincts of Crabbe and Goyle properly, leaving Draco as single recipient of Harry's death glare.

Standing alone without help wasn't Draco's preferred modus operandi, and so he made some hasty generic threats about "Potter getting his" and dashed off and into the train as if Beelzebub himself were nipping at his haunches. Harry continued to stare at the retreating boy's back for a few more seconds before he shook his head and rejoined the waiting group who had watched him deal with those thugs in that most impressive way, while the audience dissolved slowly.

"Oh damn, seems that Harry has inherited The Glare", Remus said with a smirk that betrayed his real mood. He would have loved to wipe the platform with that bigot bastard, but with his affliction, he couldn't afford to raise any stink.

"Huh?" - Tonks hooted as she turned to him, proving once again to be her elaborate self. Remus couldn't help but smile and shake his head at his girlfriend's antics.

"It was something James was famous for. He would walk at you with a look so contemptuous that you could practically see the white light, with your ancestors waving at the other end, beckoning you to join them. To this very day, only Severus had managed to at least partially imitate it. Of course he had ample opportunity to receive it, so he knows it best," Remus said and led all of them into a group chuckle, a mortified but happy Harry amidst them.

ooOOoo

Boarding the train, and both sighing about the thought that they used to board a ship in the warm Caribbean only days ago, Hermione and Harry dragged their trunks along the corridor in search of a compartment. They had considered featherlight charms

or shrinking them, but as a side-effect of their daily fencing exercises, they were able to carry them with relative ease, and considered them as manageable and a kind of training utensil. They didn't want to become lazy, after all.

After they found an empty compartment in the middle, they stowed their trunks overhead and took a seat. In fact, they only took one seat as Hermione claimed Harry's lap and gave him the first snog he ever received on the Hogwarts Express. Five minutes later Harry quickly removed his hands from under Hermione's shirt and off her breasts, as Luna Lovegood wrestled her trunk in.

"Harry, there's no need to remove your hands from there for my sake - besides, I believe Hermione seemed to rather like them there," she said in her usual, dreamy voice, while she tried to lift her trunk up onto the stowage rack.

Both sat and stared at her with flaming red heads, completely flabbergasted with the casual way Luna had commented on something so embarrassing, until Harry became aware that Luna had already tried for the third time to lift it high enough, only to fall short a few inches, again, and exposing a lot of leg while stretching in her extremely short summer dress, which tried to make up for this shortcoming by adding more colours than necessary into the pattern. With a quick flick of his hand, he took control and levitated her trunk up.

"I see your hands don't only do magic on Hermione, Harry," Luna smiled at him, looking directly at his wandless hand. Harry flinched at his faux pas, while Hermione hectically tried to find a way to explain it away, opening her mouth to begin, but coming up with nothing and closing it, again, repeatedly. Luna just smiled serenely at her, shaking her head.

"You should stop that, Hermione, or Nargles might nest in your mouth. And don't worry; I doubt anybody would believe me, anyway, if I told someone. Oh, by the way, thank you," she giggled, before she stared at an interesting pattern on the seat cushions. She could have sworn that that pattern had been upside down a moment before.

"You're welcome. How has your summer been?" Harry asked to defuse the awkwardness as Hermione as elegantly as possible slid

off his lap and snuggled into his side to join the conversation from a more appropriate position.

"Not as good as yours, I'm afraid. I haven't found anybody to snog with," Luna sadly began as she sat down in a gliding motion. "But considering that I've been looking for Snorkacks in the Swedish wilderness with Daddy, it's not really surprising. The few men there were much too old and hairy for my taste. But I already have a plan to rectify that. You two look great, by the way. Have you been on holiday together?" Luna babbled happily.

Hermione smiled at Harry. "Better, I moved in with Harry. He happens to have a beach villa we spent most of the last month in," she admitted cryptically. They had talked about what they would expose to their friends, and chose to tell less than the full truth, at least for now, in case that Snape or Dumbledore would probe their minds.

"Really? Here I was under the impression Surrey didn't have access to the ocean," Luna told them with a strange wink, as if she were talking about an inside joke. Hermione and Harry were startled and wanted to ask a follow-up question about what she meant, when the girls face became unfocused again. "The Glimpweeds must have manipulated my maps; they do this often - hello Neville!" Luna continued innocently, waving at the boy, as her train of thought gained momentum and then derailed, as usual. It didn't escape Hermione's notice that she unnecessarily leaned forward to wave at Neville, an action that made the boy nearly stumble over his trunk as her dress followed gravity's call.

The boy in question entered the compartment, stowed his trunk and seated himself next to Luna, while blushing furiously and trying to keep his eyes off her. Hermione could have sworn that Luna's smile got a bit less spacey and more devious for a moment. In no time all four were swapping stories - slightly edited in case of Harry and Hermione - of their holidays, and Harry had to promise everybody to invite them over next summer.

Of course, just before departure, Ginny finally showed up and joined them. Neville stood and stowed her trunk in the overhead space as Ron just stormed by without a word, glaring at Harry and Hermione.

Neville gave them a raised eyebrow at Ron's unusual behaviour, but received an elbow in the ribs from Luna before anybody else could answer.

"Neville, can't you see that he was bitten by a Wibbling Nerfgroper? Their bite is known to induce bouts of jealousy at friends who have better love lives. The reaction is stronger the more sexually active those couples are, which explains why Ron is such a prat to those two here. Really - and people say I don't pay attention," she said with a very Hermione-like eye-roll, and Neville nearly got a seizure from the coughing fit he developed. It didn't help his recovery that Luna leaned forward and smiled at him brightly as he was doubled over, giving him another good view of her assets while asking if she might get him something he wanted.

Meanwhile, Hermione had immediately flushed beet red while Harry nearly broke his neck by snapping his head around to face the girl who just babbled about them doing it like bunnies in polite company.

Ginny meanwhile had noted how neither of them denied Luna's claim. Hermione only needed one look at the petite redhead's sly smile to know that Ginny would pry all secrets out of her as soon as they arrived in Gryffindor tower, if not earlier.

Luna, as if she just had commented about the weather, now concentrated on Ginny, keeping the conversation flowing. "How does the shop of your brothers do? Father and I had some of their edible silly string cans with us on our expedition. It is perfect to lure Snorkacks into a trap. Too sad that they ate their way out of the spider webs we made from that string to catch them in. They were supposed to only eat the red sting and despise the blue one..."

The conversation in the compartment resumed after that, and everybody had a good time teasing each other and telling tales about their summer, and Hermione had to admit that their beach vacation had been outside of Britain to Ginny as the girl dug for gossip like a Niffler for Galleons. Being a bad liar, she had simply no chance against a girl that could make the twins spill their deepest secrets. Some very good laughs were had at Neville's expense when he had a story to tell about how he got his new cherry and unicorn hair wand and how much better he could handle this new one. Ginny, and surprisingly Luna both couldn't help to comment that this newfound skill with his wand might come handy with the

witches. Naturally, Luna's comment was much more direct than Ginny's veiled hints, and especially Harry was howling with laughter at poor Neville's sputtering denials when Luna had asked him if he was trying to woo her by indicating his skill with his wand.

Of course, their engagement and Hermione's ring got their fair share of attention, as most Gryffindor and some other girls came by for a short visit to say hello, and used that occasion to take a shorter or longer look at the ring.

That procession came to an end after an hour or so, and finally, they were alone with their friends in their compartment. Their ride was undisturbed for about another hour before the door was slid open again. Harry had hoped that it would be the food trolley, but to his dismay, it was Draco, who probably hoped to take revenge for the humiliation received at the platform. Harry had expected it already, as the boy always came back for more after he got shot down. He just couldn't leave well enough alone, couldn't he?

"Oh, seems to be the trash compartment. All the garbage of Hogwarts, in one place," the blond boy snarled, as he loomed in the door - or at least tried to block the doorway most impressive, failing badly. Like always, his sneer came across like a pampered boy whining. He just couldn't hide his true inner core.

"Got a new script writer?" Hermione huffed, not really impressed, and continued to read her book that she didn't even bother lowering. She knew Harry would watch out for her.

"Shut up, Mudblood!" was the rather expected reply, showing that that writer hadn't delivered much useful material, yet.

Instead of a verbal answer, the back of a hand slapped into Draco's cheek and threw him back into his ever-present bodyguards, Crabbe and Goyle. Pansy had obviously decided that she wasn't taking part of the second round, a sign that there might be more than just air in the head of hers.

When Draco had blinked his way through the stars, his vision cleared to the sight of an enraged Harry standing in the door, glaring daggers at the still dizzy boy. He had moved so quick that it had caught everyone by surprise, especially Hermione, who had used

him as backrest and had nearly fallen off the seat, squeaking loudly in surprise, when Harry had stood to hit Draco.

Harry wasn't surprised at all that Draco didn't take getting his deserved comeuppance like a man. Primarily because Draco wasn't a man, but a pampered brat, and secondly, because he had this strange notion that just by being born a Malfoy, he actually was worth something and should be treated with respect.

Naturally, as soon as Draco recovered slightly and knew he was outmatched, he went for his wand, but never got further than gripping the handle.

In another lightning-quick smooth move, honed in hours of draw-drills by Tonks, Harry had his wand out and trained on the face of the prone boy. For a long moment, you could see anger and fear battle in the face of Draco as the boy tried to calculate his odds.

When Harry finally chose to speak, he spoke in a very low voice, his hand shaking while he used all his willpower to not just blast that arrogant ass in the face.

"Try it, Malfoy! Make my day! I am tired of you and your stupidity. This was the last time you addressed Hermione that way, understood? You know to what I am entitled to as a Head of House, so don't cross me again or you won't like the results!"

Draco nearly jumped up at these words. "How dare you? If my father..." was all he could voice before a backhand slap, this time from Harry's left hand, threw him back into his bodyguards, again. Before any of the boys could react, Harry had his wand directly between the eyes of Draco, the tip glowing sickly pink.

"Shut up! Your Death Eater father can't help you here. The next time you step over the line, you will pay. For the last time - keep your bloody carcass away from me and my friends!" Harry roared before he slowly moved back, slammed the compartment door shut and spelled it to stay this way.

Puffing with anger, he waited for a few seconds, just in case that he had to teach that stupid jerk another lesson, but it seemed that Malfoy was satisfied with being humiliated twice in about as many hours and had left. With a long calming breath, Harry sheathed his

wand in his wrist holster and then dropped into his seat, closing his eyes and taking a few more calming breaths, completely unaware of the looks his friends, and most importantly his girlfriend, were giving him.

"Hermione?" Luna asked tentatively after a few seconds of eying a definitely feral looking Hermione. "Should we leave the compartment for a while or do you intent to keep dressed while thanking Harry?"

Hermione didn't bother to answer before she pounced at Harry, lips first. Harry regretted her restraint, but only a little.

Luna dryly commented Hermione's technique, scribbling some notes about it onto the margins of a Quibbler she had perused before Draco interrupted. "For later reference," she told Ginny and a very uncomfortable Neville, while patting the latter's thigh amiably, causing a lot of the discomfort.

After a some time, Ginny produced a package of exploding snap cards and started dealing to Neville and Luna. It took three rounds before Hermione and Harry finally noticed the bangs.

ooOOoo

About halfway into the ride, a nervous girl - Harry thought he remembered her to be in third year or so - delivered two scrolls to Harry and Neville. Harry didn't expect any letters this early into the ride. He knew that Dumbledore would certainly cite him into the office as soon as possible to inquire about the engagement announcement in the Daily Prophet or Harry's notice of guardian change. Curious, he broke the seal while Neville already was reading his own letter.

"Do you know who this Slughorn fella is?" Ginny asked while reading over Neville's shoulder.

"No idea." Harry replied with a shrug. As one, everyone turned to look at Hermione.

Rolling with her eyes, Hermione lowered her book and straightened up. "Honestly, you people should read Hogwarts, a History sometimes. He was Potions professor before Snape took over."

"All right, but why is he back at Hogwarts?" Neville asked.

"There is only one possible reason. He will take over Potions, again." Hermione told him with a frown. "But what does this mean for Snape?"

Harry stood and opened his trunk to retrieve his robes.

"Well, I think we will find out at this meeting, won't we, Neville?"

ooOOoo

"Snape's the new DADA instructor." Harry proclaimed with a frown when he came back from the meeting. Neville looked sick at the prospect of having Snape for his NEWT Defence course. If anyone noticed that Hermione didn't correct Harry that it were 'Professor Snape', they didn't comment it.

"That doesn't bode well for you," Ginny whispered in a very annoyed tone. "Snape will make Defence a nightmare, especially for you, Harry."

"Not really - we already made plans to test out early in this course since, to be frank, Hermione and I already perform at NEWT level in defence," he told her.

Neville had to snort at this. "Well, Hermione being far ahead of anyone doesn't surprise me, and if anyone has a sound motivation to do well in this class, then it's you, Harry."

"Right in one, Neville," Harry smiled. "So all we have left to do now is to find a way to do so in a manner most insulting for Snape. I just wait for the right opportunity. As we are talking about Snape, I think it will happen the first DADA class period."

No one contested that claim. Snape had never lasted five minutes without baiting Harry before.

"Will you continue the DA?" Luna asked. "I mean, you both started it last year because we had an incompetent teacher, and we know that Snape is the definition of a bad teacher," she said, speaking out loud what everyone else had thought already.

"I think the Wrackspurts nested in his head once when he was a child," she then added, ruining the serious impression she had given. Harry had a slight suspicion she did that on purpose.

"We might do that," Hermione granted. "It'll depend on our schedules, but we'll notify you. So, how was the party?"

Neville and Harry took a long look at each other and grinned broadly. Soon, they both were telling the tale of a man trying to woo the future elite and getting his foot into as many doors as possible.

ooOOoo

After a few more hours of a rather uneventful ride, they arrived at Hogsmeade and prepared to leave the train. To their surprise, there was a squad of Aurors patrolling the station. Harry didn't know them, except for one, who he thought to be Dawlish, one of the Aurors that tried and failed to arrest Dumbledore last year.

In the distance, he saw Hagrid herding the first years away, but continued to follow the mass of students towards the carriages. He was slightly surprised when Hermione suddenly stopped and stared when they cleared the station and got onto the open field where their transport was waiting. It took him a second to realize that she now was able to see the Thestrals pulling the carts.

Hermione quickly moved to stand beside one of the two magnificent beasts harnessed to the coach. She was mesmerized by these animals, their leathery skin, their powerful wings folded against their skeletal rump.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Luna said as she joined her with a serene smile. "Most people are afraid of them, but I never have met nicer animals than those," she said as she let her hand glide over the closest animal's back, and scratching it a bit. The Thestral regarded her actions with a satisfied snort, and shook his slender neck.

Hermione was still a bit stunned, and only nodded absent-minded, but she only hesitated a moment before she quickly reached out to pet the Thestral as well for a moment before she hurried to climb into the carriage. Crookshanks was rather put off after having to witness his human petting another animal, and it took Hermione the

entire ride to the castle to get herself back into her familiar's good graces.

ooOOoo

When they arrived at the castle, they quickly entered the Great Hall, being prodded by Filch with some secrecy and dark detectors rather fiercely when they passed the entrance hall, and found some seats near the door, as far away as possible from the Head table. Ginny gave them a pained look, since Ron had Seamus and, most importantly, Dean sitting with him somewhere in the middle of the table. Hermione noticed her plight, and gave her a smile and a nod in Dean's direction. She received a dazzling smile in return before Ginny dashed off to sit next to her boyfriend. Hermione also smiled when Ron looked nauseous because of Ginny and Dean flirting next to him, but had to play nice in order not to lose his last friends. Neville sat opposite to them, a place that would become his during the year.

So, all in all, they attended a nice welcoming feast, including the rather long sorting. The only difference to prior years was that Ron sat far away, and did his best to ignore their presence. Thus, not only could they follow the sorting without complaints of hunger and annoying stomach sounds, they also were able to eat in peace, keeping light conversation between themselves and Neville, and without the sight of Ron's legendary table manners, which were already disgusting some first years further down the table.

Also, being that far away from the Head table, they were able to completely ignore the teachers and the Headmaster. Although Harry had assumed otherwise, Dumbledore refrained from citing Harry to the office on the first evening after concluding the feast and sending all the students into their dorms.

Up there, Hermione and Harry spent a few more hours talking to Ginny, Dean and Neville, while Ron had Seamus in a chess battle. One by one, the others made their excuses and went to bed, until only Harry and Hermione remained and planned Snape's humiliation before they had to face the hardest part of being back at Hogwarts.

Sleeping alone.

AN:

Embirsiphonelilathia entered DerLaCroix's office and ducked nonchalantly and expertly under a dagger that was embedded into the door frame.

Side-stepping another flying dag... - letter opener, as the boss insisted to call them - which left the office, and ignoring the pained yell from the hallway she asked, "What's up, boss? Trouble?" The daily occurrences in her job finally had jaded her a wee bit.

"I am looking for a way to get that tiny 500 lbs anvil here... Postal services declined, they demand that a package has to be possible to carry with two men. They didn't accept my reasoning that two VERY STRONG men theoretically could - it's not as if they wouldn't use cranes and trucks..." the Dark Lord Cliffy ranted as he threw another d... letter opener out through the open window, letting fate decide on the impact site.

"I see. Some people just can't listen to reason," Embirsiphonelilathia agreed with a quick roll of her eyes as his back was turned. "I mean you ARE right and it's not your fault that the postal service doesn't employ strong enough people," she hastily added as he turned around and glared at her.

"See, I told them that! The world record in weight lifting is nearly 500 pounds, so two of them would easily move that thing around... But no, they only employ puny wimps," he continued ranting and reaching for another d-letter opener. Noticing that he had run out, he walked over to the wall with the throwing ax... - can opener rack. Embirsiphonelilathia placed her reports on the desk and left quickly.

ooOOoo

Well, so far, so good... I'm back... Sort of...

Still having troubles and trying to fix them, seems as if whenever I plug one hole, another one pops up.

On the other hand, I have started brewing my own mead... You know – if life gives you lemons, try to distill them...

I'll be fine, and hope I can update more often - the story is not abandoned, and I have the first book nearly finished...

Chapter 17: Treacherous shores

*** September 2nd, Gryffindor common room ***

Our less than happy couple met early in the next morning and left the common room before anybody else made it downstairs. Wandering the corridors hand in hand, they kept a comfortable silence as Hermione rested her head on his shoulder as they tried to make up for lost body contact on their long walk. Although they took quite an extended stroll, they were still among the first ones to sit for breakfast and before they even had loaded their plates, McGonagall had sought them out.

"I'm glad that both of you have decided to complete your education, even if I am less than pleased with your decision to resign from your prefect position, Miss Granger," she told them. "Although I can understand it, given the occurrences over summer," she allowed as she handed them their timetables. Hermione sighed in relief at that absolution, as she still held her Head of House in high esteem. It would have hurt her if the strict, but fair woman had not agreed to her course of action. She was so relieved that she nearly didn't get the last statement of Professor McGonagall.

"I am especially proud of you, Mr. Potter, not many people use the chance to take an OWL-level course while being NEWT-level themselves," McGonagall stated before performing an about-face and returning to the teachers table.

Hermione's eyebrow was rising rapidly at that cryptic notion. The crooked grin Harry sported made her curious. "What have you done?"

Without losing his grin, he handed her his timetable. Five seconds later she nearly tackled him off the bench with her kiss.

"You git! Why didn't you tell me that you would take 5th year Runes?" she asked the laughing Harry.

"I wasn't sure if I would be allowed to take them or at which level, I had to take a placement test to be allowed to attend," Harry told the girl squirming in his embrace.

"Really? When did you?"

"Didn't you wonder what I have been doing when your mother whisked you away for that half day of girl-time-shopping with Tonks?" Harry replied, waggling his eyebrows at her.

"Oh! I might have been distracted by shiny things - not bad for a ruse, I say," Hermione cheekily replied as she sat back and smoothed her rumpled clothing.

"And quite expensive, I have to say," Harry added with a wide grin at her as he poured some tea for him.

"I didn't hear you complain when I modeled for you that evening," Hermione harrumphed with no real malice, as she reached for the toast. "But you yet owe me an explanation for why you did," she said, waving her butter knife in his direction, as if to threaten him..

"Careful, before you take an eye out," Harry made fun of her as he recoiled in mock horror. "This thing is more dangerous than the tiny poker you fence with," he said while he disarmed her. "And it's because the Revenge uses that many, and for so many purposes. We used them for so much stuff already, and I think they're handy. I wanted to learn the basics, so I can at least understand the books in our library," he reasoned.

Hermione could agree to this, the only books their library had on the topic were in the range between rather advanced to completely unintelligible to anyone but a master in the field. Harry had been positively thrilled when they used some runes on his holster, and did ask a lot of questions. She had been pleased by his interest back then, but never would have thought he would enroll in a class. And how he went on and did this behind her back was brilliant. She loved it when he applied himself to things and took control.

Happily chatting, they dug into their breakfast. They prior had considered getting a light breakfast and maybe a bit of fencing done before class. One closer look at their timetables changed that plans. Instead of sparring, they decided on a lazy morning. They had double Defence first thing in the morning.

"Hey there!" Ginny chirped as she flopped herself onto the bench next to Hermione. "You two were up rather early this morning - what gives?"

"Habit," Hermione replied between sips of tea. "We are still on Caribbean time and over there we rose early and rested in the midday heat."

Ginny paused a bit in her sip of tea, but continued drinking without uttering a word.

"Also, we thought about getting a bit of training in before class, but since we start with Snape today, we decided to save our power," Harry added to his girlfriend's explanation, before taking another piece of toast to butter.

"Training? You mean weights and running and stuff? That sounds nasty and boring to me," Ginny told them as she reached for the scrambled eggs.

"No, fencing. The constant motion in sparring is nearly as effective as running and so it doubles as a kind of stamina training, but is more fun and practical."

"You mean with swords and stuff? Cool! Mind if I watch you sometimes?" the petite redhead said conversationally while loading her plate with eggs and bacon, the usual Weasley load. Hermione had to swallow her envy on how much that girl could eat without putting weight on.

"Any news about you and my slob brother? Did you talk?" Ginny asked between bites.

Harry had to shake his head. "Nope - he went straight to bed with the curtains drawn. Actually, I don't care. If he can't be happy for us, then he can get lost. I am so not going to ditch Hermione just to make him happy," he said, Hermione smiling at him fondly for his correct answer.

"Nor would I take him up on his advances. I got my scoundrel bagged and I am not interested in anyone else," Hermione added and refocused on her breakfast. Soon, the newspapers would arrive and she wanted to be finished by then to read it in peace, so she would know about everything someone might ask her about it. That would take long enough, and Neville would certainly join them she

wanted to talk a bit with him, as well, she had to be quick, since it wouldn't do to be late for class.

*** forty minutes later ***

"I didn't tell anyone to open their books, Granger, Potter. Five points from Gryffindor," Snape drawled as he stormed into the classroom, slamming the door shut in the process. Of course, although nearly everyone had their books out and open already, the Potion-Master-turned-Defence-teacher focused solely on his primary victims. Everyone else hurriedly put away or at least closed their books, lest they would be getting a lick, as well.

Harry refrained from rolling his eyes at the petty behaviour, but only because this had won him the bet with Hermione. She had thought Snape would say at least one sentence related to class before taking points off Harry. Harry had been - rightfully - convinced that Snape was still mad about earlier in the summer, and would start right away, maybe even before class had started. If Snape were still looking at them, he would wonder why the boy was smiling so contented.

But the man had already turned his back on his students, beginning to lecture one of his long-winded speeches. In fact, he had been rehearsing for that particular one for years. "Books alone won't help you against the Dark Arts," he sneered haughtily. "The Dark Arts are many, varied, ever-changing and eternal ..." Snape continued his monologue, drawling on and on for minutes.

"He seems to be nursing a semi over them," Harry whispered to Hermione while Snape had turned his back on the class, still speaking in reverence of the Dark Arts and their power and dangers. While Harry had no qualms about using dark curses, he certainly did not revel in them as Snape did just here. He even went as far as to show the class pictures of the results of various curses, seriously disturbing some of their colleagues with weaker stomachs. Hermione reprimanded his verbal lapse with a kick against his ankle, keeping everything above the table perfectly schooled.

"And although it baffles me how so many of you have managed to get into this NEWT course, I shall be equally surprised if any of you manage to pass this year. This year's topic is something not many wizards can accomplish, for most lack the power and mental

discipline needed to shine in this art," Snape drawled, his gaze lingering on Harry all the time during this part of his speech. It took Harry an enormous amount of willpower not to mock the man by pouting back at him.

"Wordless casting!" he continued in an overly dramatic voice. Finally, Harry's resolve cracked and he snorted loudly at that proclamation.

"Potter! Care to share what you deem funny enough to disrupt class?" Snape hissed, instantly homing in on his victim. "And that's another five points from Gryffindor," he added silkily.

"My apologies, Professor. I was just surprised that such a simple thing would be the topic for a whole year of Defence. What's up for seventh year? No more wand movements?" Harry replied in an innocent voice, but with less than innocent intentions - he never thought that Snape would give him the opening he needed that early in the year.

Snape glared at the boy in front of him. "Proves an old proverb that you actually had it right this once, Potter. Casting without complicated wand movements, but merely a flick, is in fact the topic of seventh year. It figures that you - of all people - belittle these difficult arts - since you certainly would fail at performing them."

"It can't be that hard," Harry quipped with a glint in his eyes. Hermione had steeled her face into neutrality, but had to bite her lip mentally to avoid laughing. She had done the same training with Tonks, and while Harry was far ahead of her in those two topics, she was more than able to do it for everyday spells.

"Mister Potter, your over-inflated ego is misplaced here. But if you feel yourself up to those tasks, why don't you prove it," was the response by Professor Snape, delivered with a sneer and accompanied by snickering from the Slytherin corner.

"What's in for me?" Harry asked cheekily, causing the whole class to gasp at his boldness. He calmly stared the man into the eyes, although Tonks had it driven, drummed and hammered into him and Hermione to avoid that at all cost. Both knew that he would be able scan their surface thoughts that way without problem. Deeper scanning would need a wand movement and incantation, not even Dumbledore was that good.

When Harry had asked Tonks once to teach them Occlumency, Tonks simply gave them some books and told them to read them and practice the meditations inside over a few months while she would try to find them a Legilimancer to coach them next summer or so. At his question why they couldn't find one now and get it done, Tonks laughingly replied that he would need years before he learned something remotely useful, as it's an extremely difficult and rare art.

After they had repaired all the furniture Harry had destroyed in his rage, they sat down with Tonks and told her about his sessions with Snape last year. This recollection left the Auror on leave just shy of reporting the man for an investigation - which wouldn't lead anywhere with Dumbledore protecting his pet dog, anyway.

Going along with the plan Hermione and he had come up with overnight, Harry concentrated on thinking that it could only be so hard to learn since it was widely known what a pathetic teacher Snape was. That he would need years to teach students to blow their noses, lest anything magical. He extensively pondered the fact that Snape was little more than a cook - this was the part of the plan Harry had been looking forward to the most.

The increasingly furious look at 'Professor' Snape's face told him that his trick worked. He sneered back at the man, thinking that he would even bet his education on that he certainly could manage either of the two skills easily. 'After all, I am the Boy-Who-Lived,' Harry concluded his thoughts, wielding his personal weapon of mass destruction against Snape's ego.

"Let's make a bet, Potter!" the man suddenly spat across the room, sneering so fiercely that most students instinctively leaned away from Harry to avoid getting caught in the crossfire. "If you manage either or both of those before the end of lesson, I will give you an O for the respective year. But if not, you will opt out of my class today. Do we have a deal, Mister Potter? Is that enough in for you?"

The other students wouldn't have stared any worse if Snape and Harry had changed into pink tutus and danced the tango. Hermione found that this was the perfect time to support her boyfriend.

"Sounds great - can I join this bet?" she said, talking in an air-headed, happy way and smiling sweetly at her Professor.

The sound of so many people gasping at the same time was disconcerting. Harry would have sworn that the resulting airflow made Hermione's hair move a bit.

Now everyone was staring at Hermione, most people gaping with their jaws nearly at floor level. That Granger would throw away a chance at a NEWT like that was a completely unbelievable thing.

"Why not?" Snape bellowed, throwing his hands into the air in a gesture of pure annoyance. "Is there anyone else willing to join? Whoever wants to join in is welcome to do so," he sneered, letting his glare sweep across the students who tried to melt into their desks in order to become invisible. Harry noticed Ron glaring at him from the back of the classroom, but not making any move to join - a wise decision.

To Snape, a dream had come true. While the day had started less than perfectly, having to teach Potter first thing in the morning, it really has taken an upturn. He had made plans to stick it to the Potter whelp as soon as possible, before failing Potter in his ostensibly best subject sometime during the year. He actually had made plans to use him as test dummy as often as possibly, but this was so much better. He didn't think that he would be able to get rid of Potter and his Mudblood in the first lesson!

"Deal!" both of them said in unison. They shared a short look, and Harry gave Hermione a grin and an inviting nod. Hermione produced her wand, and with a minuscule flick, instead of the 'twirl and shoo' motion needed, her book flew into her bag. While Snape started sputtering, Harry copied her actions. Both stood, Harry accio-ing their book bags and slinging them over his shoulder before pointing his wand at the door to open it, while Hermione sweetly smiled as she conjured an apple and levitated it over to Snape's desk. She then hooked her arm into Harry's and both marched out, leaving the class to stare at an openly gaping Snape, whose left eye had started to twitch in a spasmodic way.

Hermione smiled back when Neville dared to shoot them a thumbs up from where he was sitting, while Harry noticed with a smug smirk that Ron was too shocked to glare at them anymore.

After class

Severus Snape, Professor of Defence against the Dark Arts and youngest Potions Master in centuries, was in a quandary. The insufferable Potter and his know-it-all Mudblood had tricked him. No way had they managed to do this on their first try. Somewhere deep inside, he had to grudgingly respect Potter for managing to set him up so thoroughly - that was very Slytherin.

While he was proud to be the biggest bastard north of the Thames - the Malfoys lived a bit south of it - no one should ever say that he didn't honour a bet. That would be a slight on his reputation, making him look like a sore loser.

Especially since he couldn't give them any other mark than an 'O' for the year with what they showed. Their little show was actually sufficient to pass the final exam, and the Educational Department would have his accreditation if he didn't clear them for NEWT after obviously having made the grade. He knew they had been out for his hide for years, with Dumbledore barely able to bridle them.

'At least, there is one small silver lining,' he thought.

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When Harry and Hermione sat for lunch that day, they were approached by Snape in passing. As he walked by, he wordlessly tossed two envelopes on the table while glaring daggers, before leaving for his place at the head table.

Much to their surprise, they really contained their final reports with Outstanding scores for sixth and seventh year DADA. Bewildered, they looked at each other and then at Snape, who was half-heartedly picking at his meal, looking rather disgusted, probably at what he had just done.

Harry shot a bewildered look at Hermione. He certainly wasn't prepared for the man giving up that easily. His plans contained a long fight with the man and probably a test in front of the board to get out of class.

"He must have realized that this way he doesn't have to deal with us anymore," Hermione rationalized Snape's behaviour with a shrug of

her shoulders. After a moment of thought, Harry accepted that as the most probable reason.

After they had finished eating - Ron sitting farther away and his table manners out of sight made that experience much nicer - Harry gave a sigh, startling Hermione.

"You know - this day had started too good to be true, didn't it?" He said while tilting his head at something behind Hermione. As she turned around, she saw Professor McGonagall approaching.

"One snog that she has a message from Dumbledore to meet him at his office," he whispered his prophecy into her ear from behind.

"Indeed, Mister Potter," the harsh voice of his Head of House sounded before Hermione could answer. Being a cat probably transferred to her human form when it came to hearing whispered things. "While I cannot approve of your betting habits, your guess was quite correct, Mister Potter," she said. Obviously the rumours about the DADA bet had made the rounds already.

Shaking his head in a disappointed manner, Harry replied. "Sorry, Professor. Would you be so kind as to escort Hermione and me to this talk?"

"I'm afraid this isn't possible Mister Potter, the Headmaster wanted to see you immediately, alone," Professor McGonagall objected.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but this is unacceptable. We both know that this meeting has nothing to do with school, and since Hermione is my fiancée, she will accompany me," Harry said with a frown, emphasizing his decline with a resolute shake of his head. He then took a deep breath to regain his equilibrium and continued in a polite, even tone. "But I would like you to accompany us, as I'm invoking Paragraph 5a of Hogwarts Statue in relation to Headmaster Dumbledore."

Hearing the boy state this specific rule made McGonagall inhale sharply. While she had already expected that he would invoke that clause some day regarding Severus, she was surprised that Potter would use this against Albus. She knew that there was bad blood between the boy and her boss, but something like this had not occurred in Hogwarts since 1467, when the Headmaster's family

was on the brink of a blood feud against the family of one student. That Mister Potter would use that ancient rules implied that the boy considered himself being in high peril with the Headmaster present. With this rule invoked, she - in her function as Potter's Head of House - was required to stand guard over the encounter, under threat of retribution if she didn't properly fulfil that role.

"I see. In that case, would you please follow me, Mister Potter? Miss Granger is of course welcome to join us," she carefully invited the young man, less than pleased with the way this was developing. "Of course Professor," Harry said with a polite nod and stood without hesitation, indicating her to lead the way while he helped Hermione gallantly to her feet.

The two teens followed their Head of House through the corridors in silence, until they found the Gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office. Approaching the statue, a fiercely frowning Professor McGonagall barked something that sounded like "Uncle Joe's Mint Balls", causing the stone beast to come alive and step aside, revealing the staircase. Harry was tempted to comment, but chose discretion over valour.

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"Enter!" The Headmaster's voice called out as soon as the stairway had risen to the door. The Professor and her charges filed in, finding Dumbledore sitting behind his desk, doing some paperwork. As Hermione entered right behind Harry and Professor McGonagall chose to stay as well, it caused the old man in his chair to raise an eyebrow.

"There must be a misunderstanding. I only asked for Mister Potter."

"That you did, Headmaster," Professor McGonagall replied sternly, "but Mister Potter insisted in the presence of his fiancée and me, citing Paragraph 5a."

With an audible snap, the quill in the Headmaster's hand was broken in two, before he managed to regain his self-control.

"Come again?" he asked, looking calm on the outside but hoping that this was only a case of his old age catching up with him and playing tricks on his hearing.

"Mister Potter has demanded that Miss Granger and I are present for this meeting, to ensure that no harm is dealt," Professor McGonagall repeated with a frown, clearly uncomfortable with the position she was in. Harry and Hermione could empathise with her, but they simply needed her here for the plan Remus had come up with.

Dumbledore took his time to read it carefully, his eyebrows rising as he comprehended the significance of that request. "Is this really necessary?" he asked. That the boy would use such a petty way to one-up him was unexpected.

"I'm afraid so," Harry replied evenly. Both Dumbledore and McGonagall came to notice that both students had their hands in a ready position over their wands sticking out of their sleeves. When Albus looked at the boy, the boy didn't even try to hide the fact that he refused to look at the Headmaster's face, and even Hermione quickly averted her eyes when Albus turned his head and looked at her, suddenly examining a bookshelf.

"Well, take a seat then," Dumbledore said, leaning back in his overstuffed seat. He had better to do than to argue about that stupid rule. He felt slightly irritated as they sat one after the other, obviously providing cover for each other while they sat down; as if they expected an attack any moment. His irritation rose as Minerva noticed that behaviour, and instinctively assumed a more guarded stance as well.

"First, I would like to express my sincerest congratulation on your engagement. It is always nice to see some happiness in such dark times," Dumbledore began the meeting seemingly lightly, but lacking warmth in his voice.

McGonagall was not the premier Transfiguration teacher in Great Britain for being stupid. The way she raised an eyebrow at Harry because of the way that statement had been delivered made the boy try his hardest to avoid smiling. He could not even imagine how much it must irk the Headmaster that they had tricked him into that agreement.

Dumbledore hid his frown in his beard as he reminded himself, again, that this didn't really matter to his plans. Miss Granger would

do as well as any other girlfriend. Deciding to not bemoan a spilled cauldron, he stapled his hands on the table in a display of peacefulness and came to the next point.

"I must admit that I am rather disappointed in you, Harry. You had been told to stay at home, where you would be well guarded and safe," he tried to play the usually successful guilt card. Harry usually reacted well to that kind of pressure, as his upbringing had ensured.

Harry huffed loudly in reply. "Guarded, you say - that explains why Mister Diggory drew his wand on me, trying to keep me in the house by force," he said, his eyes firmly on the Headmasters stapled hands.

"He drew his wand on you?" Professor McGonagall asked promptly, surprised at the new information she had received just now.

"When I encountered Mister Diggle on my escape, he told me - after I had shown him the fresh bruises on my face, I must emphasize - that he didn't care about my wishes, I had to return into the house, or he would force me to. I had to subdue him when he went for his wand after I understandably declined to comply," Harry put forth his recollection of the event.

"I see," Professor McGonagall replied coldly, deciding to exchange a few words with Mister Diggory regarding anger management.

"Let me assure you, Harry, this was not at all on my orders," Dumbledore replied calmly, radiating his grandfatherly vibes by the ton.

"So you did not send teams of wizards after Harry to bring him back to the house against his will?" Hermione asked in a surprised voice. "I could swear that he was chased across central London by at least two Order members, trying to capture and return him," she continued, her tone gaining a mocking quality as she spoke, although it did waver a bit. Harry gave Hermione's hand a soft squeeze, which lessened the death-grip she held on his hand as this conversation went on. He knew that she must be terrified to cross the Headmaster as they did. A short squeeze in return signalled her gratitude.

"You know that it is of utmost importance that Harry spends as much time as possible inside his home, to recharge the powerful wards

that protect him there," Dumbledore stated again, repeating his sole argument.

"And this allows you to hold Harry there against his will? And to order us not to write him any letters, basically abandoning him there for months?" Hermione hissed angrily at the man in front of her, staring straight at him for a moment before she quickly turned her head to stare at a portrait behind him.

Professor McGonagall was less than pleased at the rude tone of her prize student and expressed her displeasure vehemently. "Miss Granger, you will not speak to the Headmaster like that," she chided the girl. Albus chose to lean back and watch how this would turn out as the woman made herself the new target for Harry's ire.

"This is not school related, so he is just Albus Dumbledore right now, Professor," Harry said in an even tone that deflated the Scotswoman's act masterly, especially as she had to admit that he was perfectly right with his reasoning.

"He is still the leader of the Order," McGonagall replied in an attempt to defend her superior.

"An organization neither of us is a member of," Hermione reminded her sharply.

As she couldn't refute that argument, the elderly woman had briefly run out of steam and was grasping for a straw. She reverted to the prior topic, and addressed Harry again.

"Even then, it was reckless how you endangered yourself in London, and I am disappointed that you chose to attack Miss Jones, Mister Potter!"

"I attacked whom?" Was Harry's simple reply when he couldn't fathom what she referred to after a few moments of pondering the issue.

"She claimed you hurt her when she chased you in London," McGonagall explained, her eyes narrowing to a sharp look at the boy when he suddenly started to chuckle.

"This is no laughing matter, Mister Potter," she chided sharply. "Miss Jones had to spend a full day at St. Mungo's to get all the cuts and her severe concussion treated!" She felt slightly incensed that Potter made fun of such grave injuries that required such extensive treatment.

"I meant no disrespect, Professor, but I had nothing to do with these injuries - she ran into a glass door," he answered, with Hermione smiling faintly as she remembered the time Harry had told her about that. It seemed so long ago already.

Professor McGonagall's right eyebrow rose slightly as she heard the boy's version. It stayed in position as she turned slowly to look at her boss. She remembered the tale distinctively different from when Albus reported on Miss Jones' condition. Only years of practice in reading students' body languages made her notice the signs of distress on Albus that made her believe Mister Potter's version over his.

"I see, Mister Potter. I apologize for my incorrect assumption," she said in a slightly warmer tone. This warmth did not reach her eyes that still rested on Albus.

"This is getting us nowhere," Albus tried to get the conversation back on track. "Let's try an easy question. What did you do to Voldemort?"

"I don't know," Harry replied truthfully. "It might have something to do with Hermione managing to end the blood trace you had on me," he added after a moment.

Albus could practically feel Minerva's eyes burning holes in the side of his head as he tried to justify that less than light technique. "It was the safest way to keep track of you. I had to make sure that I could find you quickly if you were to leave Privet Drive. When you removed it, I had to resort to much slower methods to find you in order to bring you back to safety."

Hermione gave a snort when he said that. "That's rich, considering that you led a group of Death Eaters directly to us," she said, her voice laced with mirth as she shook her head. Harry was equally entertained by the man. He neatly played into their game, giving them precisely all the keywords Remus had predicted. Which wasn't

exactly hard as Dumbledore only ever used two kinds of arguments: 'It's for your own good' and 'It's for the greater good'.

"This was an unfortunate accident," Dumbledore said dismissively, not wanting to delve into that topic. Sadly for him, the kids didn't share that sentiment.

"Sorry Professor, but to remove our disguises in the middle of Diagon Alley and shout out our names when we were the most wanted persons on Voldemort's list is more than just an accident," Harry said sourly.

Minerva had to shake her head at hearing the kid's version of that encounter. She was entirely sure that the boy had told the truth by the way he had spoken. Albus, on the other hand, had only informed the Order that the Death Eaters had suddenly showed up, and that a fight broke out. The Daily Prophet had brought a detailed article about the fight, but not about how it started. The fact that he had made a mistake and caused this episode to happen seemed to have escaped Albus when he reported to the Order. Little by little, her adamant support of Dumbledore had eroded away over the years. He had ignored her advice multiple times, and had put the school and students into harm's way more than once. He even watered down the quality of Hogwarts education with his quirky choices for Professors. Over the years, she found herself questioning her boss more and more, and it wasn't getting any better as this meeting progressed.

Not aware of the internal conflict his Deputy was warring with, Dumbledore stubbornly continued to fight his losing battle. "It would have happened anyway, you weren't safe outside of Privet Drive," he insisted, trying to beat the dead horse with a bigger stick as he was getting irritated by the way these children were conducting that talk.

"Why not? We were staying in Grimmauld Place, the only other location except for the Burrow you regularly allowed Harry to spend the summer," Hermione, who had the intros to their counterattacks learned by rote, inquired.

They agreed on this tactic, fearing Dumbledore might put too much pressure on Harry if he were alone against Dumbledore. The plan

was that she would run distraction for Harry, defusing Dumbledore with quick remarks, allowing Harry to deliver the blows.

"That's correct, Hermione. And the wards on Black Manor are formidable. You might remember what Bill said when he declined your request that he and Fleur should break down the wards on the Black mansion, Headmaster," Harry caught the metaphorical ball seamlessly and went for the kill.

Dumbledore could only frown in response as it was slowly dawning on him that the boy had too much ammunition on him to pursue this kind of conversation.

Meanwhile, Minerva didn't believe her ears. That stupid Sassenach had really wanted William Weasley and his fiancée to attempt breaking the wards of an ancient Mansion? That was tantamount to suicide for a curse breaker - even with a whole team, the question would be how many were still alive after the attempt! No wonder the both of them had declined and left the country for a while.

"Anyway, your extended absence means that you will have to spend all of next summer with your relatives in order to recharge the wards," Albus stated, trying to put some pressure on Harry. The boy - who was starting to really get on his nerves with the way he childishly looked everywhere but at him - needed to be protected as well as possible in order to fulfil his destiny.

He was also well aware that the Dursleys would never allow Miss Granger to stay with the boy, so they would also serve as a tool to distance the two children from each other. Maybe the threat of separation could help Dumbledore to get the kids to cooperate with him.

Dumbledore wasn't aware of the fact that with the blood binding lifted, Harry's presence would only have a marginal effect on charging these wards. A fact both of the teens knew very well.

"That would be extremely complicated, possibly impossible even, Headmaster," Harry gave a pensive reply, smiling inwardly at the way they had back-stabbed the Headmaster's plans thoroughly.

"You see, the Dursleys are currently residing at the Queen's pleasure, and I don't think they are letting teenagers room at these

facilities for summer," Hermione proceeded to turn the knife in the wound.

When Professor Dumbledore and McGonagall, both, stared at her in a thoroughly confused way, she clarified her intended meaning.

"Didn't you hear that the Dursleys have been charged and convicted of child abuse last week? Harry is not only my betrothed, but also a foster child of my parents, now. That reminds me, we will have to hand the paperwork over to Professor McGonagall tomorrow, Sweetie," she tweeted at her boyfriend. Her seemingly carefree use of a pet name helped a lot to ease the tension in Harry, who actually had to fight a chuckle. Mission accomplished, Hermione turned her attention to Professor McGonagall.

"Sorry, but it wasn't finished in time before September first, and we thought it would be more convenient to just hand it to you instead of using an owl unnecessarily. We honestly forgot to do it in all the rush of the first days," she told the flabbergasted woman, who probably hadn't heard a word of what the girl had told her.

In a way, it was shocking to see so much emotion displayed by the usually so stern woman. This revelation had been like a physical blow to her. "Abuse?" She stammered, not believing what she had just heard. Albus had admitted that the care Potter received at home was 'less than adequate', as he put it - but abuse?

"You are surely exaggerating, Miss Granger. While I knew things weren't perfect, this is a bit harsh, isn't it?" Dumbledore stated calmly. Behind his passive face, he was already thinking of ways how to have the Dursleys released from custody, at least Petunia. Vernon would probably be the harder case, and he was not of any use to strengthen the wards, as far as Dumbledore was concerned.

Harry rolled his eyes before answering. "Since they were tried and sentenced under these charges, I cannot agree to your position. They are legally convicted," he practically growled as Dumbledore had the ire to belittle what he had gone through under his watch.

"Yes, Professor. And as the judge put it, quote: I have never seen a case of systematic abuse of this magnitude before," Hermione recited, drawing the attention on her in order to give Harry some space to calm down. "I would tell you some tales about what these

monsters have done, but as this would hurt Harry, I won't," she said firmly, squeezing Harry's hand while she gave him a supporting smile.

Professor McGonagall had to reach out and hold onto a shelf to avoid swaying as her legs buckled below her as she heard that. She stammered some unintelligible things, trying to find words to express her feelings about what had occurred under her watch without her noticing anything, but came up empty, as any sane person would.

Dumbledore, on the other hand, proved stubborn as ever. "But why did you bring charges upon them? Was that really necessary?" He asked in his passive-aggressive way, unknowingly focusing his Deputy's ire on him as he defended the people she had warned him to place a child with so long ago. She felt a nearly painful tug in her chest as her appreciation of the Headmaster took another grave hit, putting it close to the breaking point..

Finally, she came to Harry's aid. "Albus, they got convicted - what more evidence do you need - I warned you myself back then, don't you remember?" She snapped vehemently. A part of her fury stemmed from the knowledge that he had dismissed her concern as unimportant back then, although she sadly had been right all the time.

Dumbledore looked sourly, but didn't pursue the thread of conversation any longer. He knew better than to fight an already lost battle, especially now, as Minerva obviously had sided with the kids over this issue.

"I'm afraid so," he agreed reluctantly.

"But this will seriously complicate your stay with them, come next summer. I hope that at least your aunt can be freed by then, so you can stay with her," he tried to find a way to salvage the situation and upholding the protection at Privet Drive. Harry, along with all other occupants of the room, couldn't believe his ears.

"With all due respect, Sir, are you mad? Why would I want to stay with convicted child abusers?" Harry said with a very sharp edge to his voice, but kept his eyes averted, still. McGonagall thought a moment about chiding him for that outburst, but couldn't really disapprove with the sentiment. Her own would have been nearly

identical. Even Dumbledore wisely chose to ignore it, and insisted on the importance of his request, instead.

"Mister Potter, your safety demands it," he said in his concerned Grandfather voice, laying the emotion thickly. Much to his annoyance, Harry didn't have any of that.

"This is out of question - I will not return there. I do have guardians and a place to stay."

"I'd rather you reconsider this decision, but that can wait," Dumbledore chose to perform a tactical retreat. He didn't want the boy to dig in his heels and do something foolish, like taking that oath he had threatened with at Grimmauld Place's doorstep during their fights. There were other things of interest to discuss, and maybe he could finally get an answer out of the boy.

"Moving on, next question: Where did you stay this summer when you left Grimmauld Place?"

"Sorry, but this isn't any of your business," Harry replied flatly, not even bothering to cease staring out of the window.

"Harry, your safety is my business - you know of your importance to the world. I must at least confirm that you are safe there," Dumbledore probed, interrupting their moment.

Harry shook his head while chuckling. "The fact that you weren't able to even find out where I had gone to should be enough proof, don't you think? Let me assure you - I'm perfectly safe there. Again, where I spend my summer isn't any of your business, Headmaster."

"I'm making it mine," Dumbledore replied, his tone getting severely snarly. "I must insist that you tell me where you have been."

"You can insist all you want, this is a family matter," Harry pressed through his grinding teeth. Only Hermione kneading his shaking hands clamped around the armrests of his chair kept him from blowing up at his adversary. Fuming inside, he focused on a passing cloud outside of the window and mentally started counting, probably to one thousand or thereabouts. Ten wouldn't be nearly enough.

"Would you at least be so polite to look at me when I am talking to you?" Dumbledore snapped at the boy who didn't even bother to stop staring out of the window when he was getting reprimanded by him. His patience had worn thin already and he was seriously considering giving the boy a piece of his mind and browbeating him into compliance instead of trying to persuade him with sweet-talk and arguments.

"That is your problem - try finding it out yourself," Harry shouted, still looking, but now glaring, out of the window. "And I won't look at you, since I prefer my thoughts unread. So does Hermione," the boy spat venomously, which was punctuated by Professor McGonagall's gasp. To Dumbledore's surprise, Miss Granger only nodded in agreement, but kept on inspecting his bookcase, probably reading the titles.

"Is there anything school related that you want to talk about? If not, both of us would like to return to our dorm," Harry growled, his patience worn so thin he couldn't stand being in the same room with that man anymore.

Those words hit Dumbledore like a Bludger, shaking him to the core. That was the reason why the boy refused to look at him? Harry was afraid that he might read his thoughts? And Miss Granger obviously held the same belief.

His earlier belief that the old rule had only been used as an act to get a cheap shot at him was shattered beyond repair. He had thought the boy was just rebelling against adults, like any boy was bound to, but now Albus suddenly realized how much the relationship between him and Harry had deteriorated already, and how badly this would damage his plans. He needed the boy to work with him!

"Please, Harry. Why all this enmity? I admit that there has been hardship in your life that I am partially responsible and sorry for, but all I did was for the greater good!" He pleaded.

"I see," Harry said carefully. "Was it also for the greater good that when I refused to leave the safety of Grimmauld Place, you tried to get Mr. Scrimgeour to arrest me under charges of turning dark and to put me under house arrest in Hogwarts, under the Headmaster's care?" he asked in a sweet tone, the smile never reaching his eyes.

Only his many years of politics saved Dumbledore from giving his surprise away at this revelation.

"Albus! You did what?" Professor McGonagall screeched at the man she thought she knew so well. Didn't she tell him that these accusations were ridiculous when he brought them up? He didn't even tell anybody about this attempt!

"He tried to get me arrested, and put under his thumb," Harry repeated. "And I don't give a damn about what you think to be the greater good! All that it means is that I am the one to sacrifice for all others to be happy! And why I don't trust you? Because you made a lot of my things your bloody business!" Harry spat with so much disgust that the Headmaster cringed involuntarily.

Albus was flabbergasted - the boy knew about this attempt. 'But how?' it shot through his mind. Within a few moments, he had found the answer - Miss Tonks. Scrimgeour must have used that fact to gain some political capital with the boy, and let the information slip. This metaphorical cauldron was not only spilt, it was completely turned over.

'How, by Merlin's shaggy beard, do I salvage this mess?'

Lost in thought, Albus didn't stop the boy when Harry stood and left, along with his girlfriend, without being dismissed. He only winced slightly when he received a fierce glare from his Deputy Headmistress when she turned to follow her students, promising wordlessly to have a private talk with him, later.

He was too busy finding a solution for his problems. Somehow, he had to regain the boy's trust or all the plans he made for Britain's future would be moot. Deep inside, he had a feeling that this anger wasn't just about the Dursleys, and their quarrels, of that Albus was sure. He had a strong feeling that he had missed something crucial concerning Mister Potter, and this was the true root of their problem.

Maybe he should have this long overdue chat with Vector or Babbling about his broken Distanciaheadometer. It was the first of the many mysteries that surrounded Harry nowadays.

ooOOoo

The next morning, Hedwig arrived at Grimmauld Place during breakfast. Overjoyed at the early first letter, Margret removed the post from the owl's leg, while Remus procured some bacon for it.

Everyone continued their meal while Margret read the long letter. Obviously Hermione had a lot to tell for only two days absence.

"The good news first: They are well, McGonagall is apparently on their side, and the plan to deal with Dumbledore seems to have worked flawlessly," she proclaimed after a few paragraphs.

"Good," Remus remarked after a sip of his tea. "It might suffice to make Albus think long and hard about what he is doing. If he were to ease up on his control issues, he would be a valuable ally."

Tonks nodded her agreement with this while she reached for the toast.

"Might I have a minute of your time, Tonks?" Margret asked after reading the first half of the letter, interrupting the woman's fight with the toast and honey, which the tablecloth had lost utterly.

"Fire away!" Tonks replied while licking some excess honey off her fingers.

"Is it possible to take NEWT exam mid-term?"

"Actually, yes, it is. Usually, you take them at the end of seventh year, but there are lots of people out of school who apply during the year to earn diplomas, OWL and NEWT both. Why?"

"It seems that Harry has somehow tricked Professor Snape into passing him and Hermione with O's for both remaining years." Margret stated dryly. She wanted to continue but had to wait a little. Remus had gotten his tea into the wrong pipe and was currently coughing up a lung while Tonks helplessly patted his back.

Margret waited until Remus had recovered and resumed his breakfast before she began anew.

"I am not sure if I should approve of this. Classes are serious, after all. Don't they miss a lot if they don't attend those years?" Margret voiced her qualms, frowning at the general situation.

"We had a talk about that early in July, when I finally broke them on their habits of schoolkid casting. Even before we went to the island, both were performing at seventh year level, wordless and point-casting. So basically, they know all the practical stuff, except for some minor hexes and jinxes they get in sixth year. They only need some revising on the theory from the first five years and the theory portion of book six and seven. Once they're done with that, we could do the testing within a day's notice. I believe McGonagall would certainly let us escort them over to the ministry for a day during class, if needed, but I think we could arrange for a Hogsmeade weekend test. Do they need anything else?" She asked, and Margret checked the document once again.

"Yes, they ask about a list of topics they should study for the exams. Would you?" she asked, and Tonks replied with a "Yep, can do," before she had finished her question. Margret quickly finished the letter and found one last point to check.

"Oh! And Hermione inquires what forms they would need to apply for Harry's Mastery," she described the remaining contents of the letter. Unfortunately - and completely coincidentally, of course - the word 'Mastery' was uttered at precisely the moment Remus was taking a hearty bite of a scone.

This time, Remus needed a potion to recover.

AN:

For more than one hour, Embirsiphonelilathia had now listened to DerLacroix negotiating with the land broker. Apart from occasional requests for some documents to her, they had only conversed in Hungarian, which sounded much like a duck, a dolphin and some other animals chatting, with the underlying main theme of them firing machine gun salvos of vowels and consonants at each other.

Finally, all the men around the table made some agreeing noises, and hands were shaken. After some more speech salvos at some secretary, papers were procured. A short look at those proved that this language was even harder in the written word. The papers were

signed, hands were shaken again and after some more chattering, the land broker left the room.

"So", Embi asked her boss as she started putting the papers away
"Successful negotiations?"

"Very," DerLaCroix replied smugly. "We came to an understanding that there would be an understanding in the future."

"What?"

"If I understood them correctly, we came to an agreement to come to an agreement when we meet the next time. You know, it's hard to say things in a language as old as Hungarian, and it takes time to say things," DerLaCroix said as he took his coat. "What?" he asked when he noticed his aide gaping at him.

"You came to an agreement to have an agreement? Later? When?"

"Well, we'll still have to agree on a certain date," DerLaCroix explained, but Embirsiphonelilathia didn't hear the rest, as her brain initiated an emergency shut-down sequence.

ooOOoo

Once more, lots of thanks to my trusted beta, Embi. Also, alix has joined the team, helping with watching out for Slobbering Grambusters (Luna swears they do exist).
Please give her a warm welcome... OR ELSE...

Singled out minions:

whatweareafreaidof - your mileage may vary, but where I come from, someone like Ron would be considered a grade-A jerk and would have had several encounters with fists, male and female, for all the shit he pulled over the years.

But until now, all that happened in this story was that he behaved like an immature teenager with an anger management problem. Like... well, just like Ron Weasley... Exactly like he's portrayed in the books. (until suddenly Hermione suffered brain damage and grew attracted to the boy who did nothing but argue with her. And he still was a huge jerk in book 7... If JKR weren't so in love with him, this would have been his last mistake.) He's not Voldie's second in

command, and hasn't even conjured a greater demon, yet, so I can't understand why you complain that much...

Raven3182 - yeah, it's intentional that he does outsmart people - now. Harry has radically changed his approach to things without anybody learning about it. Naturally, people are completely surprised by his new behavior. Currently, no one is aware of his plans and capabilities, but as soon as this moment of surprise ceases, people will adapt.

Chapter 18: The road to hell and good intentions.

"Aaaand checkmate!" Ron gloated as his knight came out of nowhere and skewered Harry's queen. Harry had been sure that he had the situation under control for the last five moves, but he obviously had run right into Ron's trap.

"Good one," Harry said as he got out of his chair, intending to join Hermione and Neville at the study desk. He figured that she should be nearly done with her Arithmancy work by now, and he still had the essay to finish. He had let Ron badger him into a game, but it was entirely too awkward to really enjoy it.

Ron looked up from setting up the board when Harry stood. "Where are you going? Come on, I'll give you a rematch."

"Sorry Ron, but I've got some work left. I want to get my homework done and a bit studying in before bed," Harry replied. "Maybe tomorrow?"

Ron's look clearly showed his opinion. "You spent entirely too much time with her," he accused. He didn't like it at all that Hermione succeeded in warping Harry into her likeness - which was something inherently bad and evil in his opinion - even making him study for class.

Harry ignored that outburst and stood. "I want to spend time with her, and I need to get my homework done," he said. "You should, too."

"Come on, there is more than enough time for that later - one more quick game won't hurt," Ron continued to wheedle Harry into goofing off. "How about exploding snap or gobstones - you might even win a game." He said with a wide grin at Harry.

Harry sighed deeply, but nonetheless he stood and wordlessly went to join his girlfriend, leaving a frowning Ron behind. Hermione casually slid her chair to the side to allow him to sit next to her, her gesture and her slight frown telling Harry that she had observed the incident, but chose not to comment. Neville shot him a sympathetic glance while Ron wasn't looking as he was trying to coax Seamus into a game.

With another sigh, Harry kissed Hermione's cheek tenderly. With a faint purr, Hermione's face evened as the tension left her as she returned her attention to her books. Harry sighed again, and pulled his earlier discarded books closer and started working on his transfiguration essay, trying to ignore his plight, while Neville asked Hermione to check his.

Harry's main problem was that Ron had graciously decided - after two days of moping - that he would magnanimously ignore their betrayal of his trust and had gone straight back to business as usual.

With Harry, at least.

Hermione, on the other hand, was still persona non grata. With her, Ron kept a polite peace, still arguing about minor things, but mostly ignoring her presence, except for frequent requests to copy her homework. The tentative peace was only held by the fact that neither of them wanted to anger Harry. Hermione held back in order not to disturb Harry's friendship with Ron. Of course, she was still angry at Ron, but this was more or less a perpetual state she had grown used to over the years.

At first, Harry was glad to have his friend back, but it came at a price - within the last two days, Ron had managed to cut Harry's study time in half, just by relentlessly arguing that Harry should spend more time on his broom or with him. At first Harry gave in, in order to bridge over the gap in their friendship, but it was quickly getting on his nerves. The main problem was that Ron was completely convinced that Harry only studied to impress Hermione in order to get rewarded. Every attempt to convince him that Harry actually liked studying - to a certain degree - was answered by a suggestive smirk.

At least Ron hadn't tried to ask Harry about "how far he had gotten, yet". Harry would feel sorry if he had to eviscerate his best friend.

"He would do well to copy your study habits," Hermione whispered as Ron stalked up the stairs angrily after Seamus refused to play, as well. She was rather happy that Ron had defaulted to his 'ignore her; she will crawl back for forgiveness' attitude towards her.

"He's still leeching off the benefits of the DA sessions," Harry responded tiredly, trying to get his mind back on his transfiguration

essay that he had already roughly drafted. "True, true," Neville said from across the desk, leafing lazily through a Herbology text while Hermione looked his essay over.

Hermione could only roll her eyes at her boyfriend's assessment while she rearranged a paragraph in Neville's text with her wand. True, the work with the DA last year had brought all of its members far ahead of their classmates, but the grinder Tonks had put the two through had increased this advantage heftily.

"He won't be for long," Hermione replied with her trademark roll of the eyes as she wrote something onto the parchment, with Harry nodding his approval to that statement.

The pace set in class was tremendous, certainly on equal footing with fifth year, and as far as it could be told this early in the year, Hermione was still firmly in the lead and Harry now a close second, since he now actually studied.

Hermione waved her wand over Neville's parchment, drying the ink so she wouldn't smear it. "That's it, Neville - just redo that last paragraph, you got it nearly backwards - I wrote you the source and page next to it so you can look it up for the final version."

"I did?" Neville said surprised as he took his parchment back. "Well, I better go to the library and look it up, then, thanks for the help," he said as he packed his stuff and rose.

"My pleasure." Hermione responded with a genuine smile. Of course, she was already done with the final version of her essay. Given that wordless casting was a criterion in every class this year, she and Harry were rather comfortable with their workload. While their classmates were often seen struggling with their homework, still trying to make their spells work without incantations, they didn't need that practical training anymore. So effectively, they had only half the homework to do.

"Oh, one thing, Harry," she said as Neville was on his way to the portrait hole. She then waited patiently until after Harry had finished his current work and paid her attention to inform him of her news. "Professor Vector asked me about my new wand," she told him after she had quickly checked whether they had an audience.

"I made up a story that we got them from a wand maker in France, who we had visited during holidays. The official version is that our suitcase got bumped up badly during flight, and our wands had been snapped. We stumbled across her shop when visiting Marseilles and picked up wands there. The name was 'Raquelle's Batons', she was a nice lady, brown hair, a very small shop, and told us that snapped wands couldn't be repaired," she whispered across the table.

"Ok, I'll try to remember that," Harry smiled back. "Could you look my essay over, just to be sure?" he suddenly said.

Hermione was a bit surprised by the sudden change of topic, but when she turned, she saw that Ron had returned and was closing in on them, his book bag in hand. Obviously, he had finally decided to do his homework, as no one was available to play games. "Of course Harry," she said loudly. "I'll gladly look your essay over, and then I'll help you with Runes, ok?" she said, smiling slightly as she saw Ron frown deeply as she mentioned Harry's sacrilege.

Harry couldn't help but chuckle at Hermione's antics. At least, she was teasing Ron instead of hexing. Being grateful for small favours, he pulled out his Runes book as Hermione grabbed her quill and charmed the ink bottle red in preparation for his essay.

Surprisingly, Harry had adapted nicely into the Ancient Runes class he shared with some fifth year Ravenclaws, and with occasional help from Hermione was more than able to keep up. Hermione did her best to show her appreciation of his course selection whenever the topic came up, which soon made that class Harry's favourite. After all, he was already done with DADA.

The biggest surprise that first week was that Harry was allowed to attend Potions class, since Professor Slughorn did allow participation with an "E".

ooOOoo

"Oh, Mister Potter, glad to see you again," Professor Slughorn beamed when he opened the door to see Harry waiting there along with Hermione and the rest of the students.

When Harry gave Hermione a peck on the cheek and turned to leave, the man was less than happy. "Where are you going?" he asked. "Class is starting right now, Mister Potter."

"Oh, I'm not attending Potions, I don't have the necessary O for it," Harry tried to excuse himself, but that didn't work with Slughorn.

"Nonsense, I think that an E Owl is perfectly acceptable for a NEWT course, and I happen to know that you have passed with that mark, Mister Potter. So come in and take a seat!"

Since Hermione also smiled happily at him, Harry realized that he wouldn't get out of that, and agreed with a friendly nod. After all, he had achieved an E as Snape's chew toy, so it couldn't be that bad.

The lesson started off with a short quiz, the students had to identify some potions that Slughorn had made. Of course, Hermione had all of them right, but Harry was proud he identified one. He'd never forget the look of Polyjuice Potion. Or the taste...

One of the Potions turned out to be Amortentia, a love potion, which had an intoxicating smell that should represent the things a person loves most. To Harry, it smelled of treacle tart, the woody smell of a broomstick handle, and something flowery he knew. He assumed it referred to the jungle on the island.

"Really? It reminds me of the sea, new parchment and the smell of your hair," Hermione whispered back when he told her this.

Meanwhile, Slughorn had proposed an interesting challenge for his students planned for the first hour. They were to square off against each other to produce the Draught of Living Death to win a small bottle of Felix Felicis, also known as liquefied luck, easily enough to last for about 12 perfect hours.

"You'll find the instructions on page 146 of your books," Slughorn said, and found himself confused when Harry raised his hand after that statement.

"Sorry, Professor, but as I hadn't planned on attending this year, I don't have a book of my own, and I presume we aren't supposed to share books during this contest," he admitted uncomfortably, hearing Malfoy chuckle from somewhere behind him, mocking him.

Slughorn took a moment to process, before his face lightened up. "Of course, my boy," he said, unaware that this phrase made Harry grind his teeth. "Here, take this one until you can obtain a new one," he said as he handed Harry a random one from the Potions room library.

While Slughorn was answering some questions from the other side of the classroom, Harry flipped to the given page. Much to his surprise and dismay, he found side notes scribbled all over the text, presumably by the former owner. A quick look at the name tag, revealed a not very helpful moniker of 'Halfblood Prince' as the person in question.

"Hermione?" Harry whispered while people started setting up their cauldrons, and sorting their tools. "What do you think of these notes?" he asked her for input.

"I'm not so sure about them," she said with a frown at the defaced pages. "Usually, you are supposed to take notes on parchment, not like this."

"Propriety and neatness aside, I doubt he wrote those down because they are wrong," Harry insisted with a sigh.

Hermione was reluctant to agree. "Who knows, after all, he discarded the book later, so for all we know, it might as well be a prank on some poor sod who happens to borrow that book."

Harry stared at her for a moment, before blinking and shaking his head. "You spent entirely too much time around the twins," he chuckled as he readied his desk for the work.

"That statement applies to any span of time you have to endure those two clowns when they are in mood to be funny," Hermione sighed.

"For a given value of funny," Harry commented dryly. "But you're right, I could see them editing a book like that, even if they never were to hear about the results. They admitted that they had left a series of pranks hidden around the school that they keyed to Filch. They say it's so he doesn't forget them too soon."

Hermione huffed in reply. Filch probably still had nightmares about these two. "So, are you going to use these, now?"

"After you put pictures of the twins into my head? Hell, no - for all I know this could as well be a belated prank from the Marauders, given the age of this book. I say we check these notes later, and I'll stick to the original recipe, for now. With you in the team, we'll win this contest, anyway," he whispered back at her, chuckling as she blushed under his praise.

Naturally, Hermione won that contest, while Harry had finished somewhere in the middle field, as expected. Of course he was very proud of his talented girlfriend, a sentiment that was now shared with their Potions Professor, who nearly fell over himself in order to praise her.

ooOOoo

"Damn," Harry moped later that evening in the room of requirement. When they tried the alternate instructions from his book, they produced an even better result than Hermione had achieved.. "I'd have beaten you," he whined.

"By cheating," Hermione set him straight as she started to dispose of the potion.

"It's not cheating if I had better instructions out of luck," Harry insisted lightly, which was answered by a huff from his girl.

Hermione's scowl deepened, and Harry quickly pulled her into a hug. "Only joking," he said as she weakly struggled against his embrace. "We both know you are much better in potions than me," he whispered into her ear, smiling as she ceased her mock resistance and melted into his arms. "You can have that title - it's fine with me as long as I still kick your cute bum in Defence," he teased.

"You're not that bad in Potions, but I'm still a bit uncomfortable with modified instructions," Hermione replied after she had enjoyed his hug for an appropriate time.

"You just don't want to admit that I was right with my assessment that the notes wouldn't have been in there for nothing," he said.

"It's dangerous - anybody could write notes into his book, that wouldn't make them right," Hermione replied. When Harry started chuckling, she indignantly huffed at him, "What?"

"Oh, quit being so stubborn, just for the sake of it," Harry chided her. "People like the twins aside, why would someone place nonsense instructions in his book? For all we know, these hints are probably out of class, you know, a long time ago, in times when there were competent teachers, who gave these corrections..."

She slowly freed herself and started to put away her tools into her kit. After a few moments, Harry started to help.

"All right, you do have a point," Hermione finally hesitantly agreed while she stowed the last ingredients in her kit. "I'm still not comfortable with it," she said, cutting Harry off as he wanted to interject, "But I think it would only be prudent to use those when plausible. I do wonder why the books haven't been updated, yet."

"Maybe so that teachers can look better?" Harry provided his opinion as he handed her the mortar he just cleaned. Hermione gracefully chose to ignore that dig, only rolling her eyes in her usual fashion.

"Anyway, before we should use these instructions, we probably should read all of them first, to confirm the plausibility of those changes. I'll lend you mine until I'm done with it," Hermione insisted as she swapped their books. This time, it was Harry who rolled his eyes.

ooOOoo

During the next week, it was even more obvious how much Harry had changed when it came to studying. They had agreed to make the most of Hogwarts as long as they were there. At first, Harry had let himself be slowed down by Ron in order not to cut his old friend off; but due to the awkwardness of their interaction, Harry soon found himself cutting that time more and more.

Along with their classes they also had continued their private studies, which meant they did some fencing every morning in the Room of Requirement, and were reading lots of books they checked out in the library.

It became a normal sight to find them lounging on a couch next to the fire, both engrossed in a book while Harry absentmindedly fought off Hermione's attempts to burrow her feet under his robes to steal warmth.

The particular change that made his study time swell massively in comparison to earlier years was that this usually occurred during the times Harry used to 'hang out' with Ron.

Ron didn't take this all too well, even though Harry had another chess match with Ron that week - inevitably losing badly. But once more, Harry stopped at one match, no matter how much Ron wheedled for a replay. When asked for the reason, Harry truthfully said that he had found a few interesting books about charms in the library he had arranged to go over with Hermione.

For a moment, he was sure Ron would blow up at him by the fierce frown he sported, but then, Ron suddenly shrugged and left. He even refrained from insulting Hermione for changing Harry's study habits in front of Harry.

Going against his better judgment, Harry hoped that this meant that an improvement of their relationship was in reach.

Surprisingly, he grew a lot closer to Neville over this period. He never before had noticed that Neville spent that much time with Hermione while doing his homework, and actually had better grasp of many topics than Harry had. That finding only confirmed his resolution to keep the milling around to a minimum.

ooOOoo

One day during their second week, they found an unexpected guest in the common room.

"Hi, guys!" Ginny yawned from the couch, wearing casual clothes instead of the school uniform, just like them, only without the training bags.

Given the fact that it was six o'clock in the morning, at least an hour before she would even start to stir in her bed, they were rather surprised to see the girl there.

"Mind if I join you today? Hermione promised to let me watch you one day, and I woke up early today."

Hermione doubted the truthfulness of that statement, since she had a very long chat with Ginny just yesterday, in which the younger girl had tried to get details about her and Harry. Especially about their carnal knowledge of each other, Ginny had figured out quickly that something more than just snogging had occurred between Harry and Hermione. She was now on a mission to find out.

Hermione toyed with the thought of confiding in the girl, since it would be fun, if only in a 'corrupting the innocent' way. Also, she needed someone to talk 'girl' to, and neither Mum nor Tonks were at hand.

But that was not for Harry to know about, so she put on a brave face and agreed, since it was no hardship on their accord.

Chatting idly, they travelled to the Room of Requirement, where Harry asked for their now usual place to train, this time with the addendum that the door should also open to Ginny.

Ginny was only slightly impressed by the setup of the room. The room was a big hall, with a several foot wide mirrors at one side, and a polished wooden floor. Some target dummies were leaning in one corner, ready to be set up, and in the next corner there was a table flanked by couches, a rough copy of the ones in Grimmauld place. Ginny immediately took possession of that feature, tiredly stretching out on one of these while the other two started unloading their bags onto the table.

They quickly readied their stuff and after a quick warm-up and a - for Ginny's sake - short review of their stances, lunges and parries, they squared off against each other.

A now awake Ginny first cheered both of them on, equally, and was really excited about the swordplay they demonstrated. Fencing was seen as a very noble art in wizardry, but only a few older families still practiced that skill. Especially since it was bodily taxing, and most wizards shied away from all kinds of bodily exhausting activities. These cheers turned into frightened squeaks, soon, when they were done with the formal training and went into an unscripted duel...

ooOOoo

Hermione had just managed to block and duck under a high lunge of Harry, and let her blade slide along his as he tried to retreat, while quickly stepping forward to keep him within her measure. Gaining the inside position with an elegant twirl of her quicker blade and a side step, she had him exactly where she needed him to be as she gracefully stepped forward into her own lunge at his chest.

Harry could only avoid her tip by turning out of alignment and bending at the hip. This saved him for the moment, but now Hermione had him caught in a chase of lunges and feints. Only his longer blade and faster footwork allowed him to avoid defeat at Hermione's precise thrusts as she chased him across the room.

Yielding ground was a good way to hold someone at bay when you have a longer weapon, but at some point, you don't have anywhere to run to anymore. Anticipating this moment as he was driven towards the corner, Harry - in a desperate move - chose to cease trying to regain his distance and to close in, instead. This would normally be suicide against Hermione's shorter blade, but it allowed him to use the second advantage of his blade.

With a side-step that included a swing of his arm, he tried to cut at Hermione's midsection, hoping to score a surprise hit.

Hermione gasped in surprise at this change of tactic and tempo, but stuck to her technique. Letting her sword 'stick' to Harry's blade, she tried to use leverage to bring the point of her edgeless blade to bear.

Sadly, Harry had much better position and greater strength on his side, and for a moment, it seemed as if Harry would score first blood - but then Hermione stopped pushing against him and let his power force her into a twirl. In a display of unanticipated suppleness, she bent over forward and then backward, keeping contact to his blade while she turned a full 360 degrees, letting Harry pass. The tip of his rapier ripped her shirt as it swung by, mere fractions of an inch from her back as she completed her turn. Both stumbling from the strange move, she regained her footing quicker and lunged at him, hitting him directly in the back, between the shoulder blades, causing him to cry out sharply.

Of course, she couldn't resist calling out "Touché!" at his cry, knowing fully well how much Harry hated it when she did that.

"Harry! NO!" Ginny cried out between her hands covering her cheeks, rushing over to help her injured friend.

But instead of finding him hurt and bleeding, he was fine, except for his bruised ego and a frown as he rubbed the spot on his back.

"You two are crazy," Ginny scolded Hermione and Harry, as the older girl fetched a towel from the desk to towel off some sweat. "Absolutely bloody crazy!" she yelled.

Harry was still standing there and sulking a bit, he really had hoped to beat Hermione this time, but he had fallen for her feint and had let her goad him into that fatal lunge. Granted, he was gaining ground on her, but her technique was more precise and her blade was quicker than his. He really had to work on his tendency to rush into things at the first glimpse of an opening. It did work, occasionally; but just as often, he simply ran into traps.

"You could have seriously hurt each other!" Ginny meanwhile continued her tirade, gaining momentum.

Hermione threw the soiled towel into a bin and chuckled lightly. "No way," she said as she picked up her sword from the desk again, and poked it at Harry's backside as he passed her in search for his towel. With a yelp, Harry jumped and turned to glare at her. Hermione couldn't help but to shoot a saucy smile back at him.

"The blades are charmed to not cut or stick into anything, and deliver a stinging hex instead. It's a fencing charm we use on them every day before training," she told Ginny, without averting her eyes from her boyfriend's.

Hermione didn't miss the moment Harry's eyes widened for a fraction of a moment when inspiration hit him. Wordlessly, he picked up a towel and went over to the target dummies in order to let off some steam on them, while Hermione found herself anticipating what he had in mind for her. Nettling him like that was a sure way to find a very creative Harry when it came to make her pay for it.

Ginny missed that hidden interaction and gave Hermione a knowing grin and the universal 'Boys!' eye-roll as Harry stomped off.

"Anyway - That was awesome!" Ginny squealed as soon as Harry was a few feet away and started setting up the dummies for them.

"Thanks," Hermione said flatly. "But you should watch Tonks - she taught us and she is ages ahead of us. We wouldn't even need to charm our blades when we spar with her, she's so much better, but she insists on it, just in case," Hermione told her.

"That's really wise of her. After all, you could always get lucky," Ginny agreed; only to flinch when Harry started laughing from across the room.

Harry shook his head as he corrected his friend's assessment. "No, not in case one of us gets lucky - it's in case we fail so badly that we fall onto our own blades!" he chuckled as Ginny openly gaped at him.

Hermione agreed fully. "She's right. None of us has ever lasted longer than a few seconds against her, and that was because we hesitated to attack her for so long and she was playing with us. The first attack ends a fight with her, either her first attack or her response to ours," she explained.

"A couple of years experience in combination with the ability to change the shape of your body at will does that for you," Harry shouted from the corner he had finished putting up the dummies in.

"But she's a klutz!" Ginny stammered. "She can't walk two steps without falling over!"

"That's only when she's not concentrating," Hermione replied.

"Huh?"

"When she's not paying attention to the here and now, she starts shifting her shape unconsciously, and those minuscule shifts make her stumble. Her mother was a fencing aficionado - she loved sports, but Black girls were forbidden to play Quidditch, so fencing was the only alternative acceptable to the family. When Tonks came into her abilities and became a klutz, she taught her fencing in order to alleviate these problems. It worked - when she's in a fight, she is

in complete control of her body. If you can't take her out by massive spellfire, she'll dodge her way out of every attack," Hermione replied.

Harry silently smiled in his corner. The massive crossfire part was exactly how he defeated Tonks. Trying to aim at her was futile - she even went so far as to transform her left arm into a baby version to avoid a hit in the first fight he ever won against her. Harry was sure she had actually managed to let one spell pass through her belly in that fight, but Tonks had diverted his inquiries with lewd comments whenever he asked her about that.

"In fencing, she is a nightmare - believe me, I'd never challenge her to a true fight, even if I had an army with me, although, if I had D'Artagnan and his friends, I might dare taking a chance, maybe," Hermione continued during his trip down memory lane.

"Who?"

"You know, the three Musketeers," Hermione explained. "Athos, Porthos, Aramis. And their friend D'Artagnan..."

Ginny's face plainly showed that she didn't.

"All for one, one for all?" Hermione tried, again with no visible recognition in her counterpart.

Ginny had her face scrunched up in concentration as she tried to connect the tidbits Hermione had given her to anything she knew. When her face suddenly lit up, Hermione returned a smile, sure the girl had finally remembered the famous story.

"Muskets! That are these modern Muggle... gums... from the world war, aren't they? I didn't know that you could use them for fencing," Ginny's mouth disproved that assumption while Hermione's face fell.

Momentarily stunned, Hermione stood there, wondering if she had the time to correct all the points she had noted being wrong with that statement, while Harry couldn't help but laugh out loud in the background.

"Remind me to talk to you about this later, Ginny, there seems to be quite a bit amiss in Muggle Studies," Hermione said overly calm,

while slowly unclenching her fists. "We better continue with our training, breakfast is closing in, and we'll have plenty of time, then. Feel free to join Harry, I have some practicing to do," Hermione said as she made it over to the sitting area to work on her casting.

There, Hermione started to refine her work on the Accio spell, sending various objects flying around the room towards her. She had already reduced the wand movements to a lazy swish of her wand, and was trying to get closer to a simple point. Wordless incantation was already a standard for her, as she proved by banishing them back to their starting spots, although with full wand usage.

Ginny was extremely impressed with what she saw there, at least until she turned to the source of the crashes that started sounding out behind her.

Within seconds, Ginny was beyond scared as she saw how casually Harry summoned the most extreme punishment upon those poor puppets without uttering a word and only the barest of flicks of his wand. A display of colorful rays of light, most of these unknown to Ginny and many other light-sided people, screamed and hissed through the air, bridging the gap between Harry and his targets. On hitting the puppets, they were cutting them in half, setting them aflame, decomposing them quickly or simply blowing them apart in various ways. Some dummies with lesser damage sustained managed to repair themselves while Harry already flayed another one of their comrades, the only visible wand movement being when he changed targets.

"You must show me how to do this!" Ginny shouted excited, jumping up and down like Dobby on a good day after Harry had nearly run out of dummies, leaving smoking and sizzling debris behind. "That was unreal! It was so beyond scary when you did all of this in that weird silent way! It would be soooo cool if I could do that!"

Hermione exchanged an uncertain glance with Harry, who had stopped at the squealed outburst, staring a bit shocked at the gushing girl.

She wasn't sure if Ginny would be able to do that, yet. While Harry had power in abundance to offset the inefficient casting - meaning he didn't really count as an example, Hermione was two years older

than Ginny - nearly three if you counted the extra months she lived through with the help of the time-turner. That made Hermione's core rather mature in comparison.

Additionally, while her core was good sized, but nothing to write epic tales about, she had something that made her and Harry - especially him - able to do that - willpower. It was left to decide if Ginny could show the determination needed to master those two techniques. Given the fact that the girl in question was rather easy to annoy and her best friend, she was wary about the best way to put it.

It was Harry who came to her help, trying to keep the girl's hopes down. "Well, we can try, but there is no guarantee. Remember, this is NEWT stuff, and most wizards never get this at all, you understand?" he carefully explained, gently easing the girl into the knowledge that this might be unattainable for her.

"Yeah, I know," Ginny pouted. "Still, I would like to try. Will you help me?" she pleaded, puppy eyes on full power.

Harry naturally relented and waved her over to the sitting area. "Sit down," he ordered the girl, while he sat next to Hermione. Ginny eagerly flopped down on the opposite couch, listening attentively.

"I have a basic exercise for you, while I work with Hermione. First, simply cast a lumos spell. Concentrate on the effects. Try feeling how the magic flows," he told her.

"When you think you got a feeling, try it without incantation. Visualize your wand lighting up. Wordless casting isn't done by just saying the words in your head, that doesn't work - you also have to visualize the result and make it happen," Harry explained, waiting until Ginny acknowledged receipt by nodding thoughtfully.

"That's how Hermione and I learned it - start with casting the spell normally for a few times and then try it wordless. Cast it loud every ten tries or so, and focus on how the spell feels like before trying again."

Ginny nodded and began casting vocally, and then fell into the rhythm of sitting silently, her face scrunched up in concentration and alertly casting the spell once in a while.

"Oh, and Ginny, don't be surprised, we are going to put up some privacy charms in that other corner, so we can train without distracting you, or you us," Harry said over his shoulder as he led Hermione away, only getting a grunt of approval as reply.

Quickly, Harry cast a multitude of charms, from a very helpful muffling spell Hermione had found in the book up to obscuring, ending with a repelling ward, just in case. Ginny was a Weasley and a girl, making her one of the most curious creatures possible.

This done, Harry returned to the task of helping Hermione, who meanwhile had transfigured a heap of dummy parts into a pair of chairs and a small table for them to sit, learn wandless casting.

They had earlier settled for trying to float a feather, which currently was the recipient of Hermione's steely glare. Seriously, the way she was glaring and pointing her hand at the feather made Harry think that she was about to read that poor feather the riot act. She still had difficulties achieving anything, and every now and then, her temper flared, resulting in the feather getting incinerated. This was coincidentally the reason why Harry didn't dare to tell her how silly she looked.

Dutifully, Harry told her every time that this was actually a good sign, since she at least was projecting her magic at the feather; she now only had to learn controlling it. Hermione always just huffed at him and conjured a new feather to stare to death, while Harry fetched his bag and continued to read up the theory portions Tonks had advised crucial for their NEWT exams.

She had sent them a letter to that regard, also telling Harry that she had started the paperwork on his Mastery already and would submit them and his needed memories during Christmas break, if - and only if - she was finished with the forms by then.

Be that as it may, all good things come to an end sometimes, and soon they were on the way back to their dormitories to shower and dress for class. Ginny hadn't managed to do anything in her practice, but she wheedled and puppy-dog-eyed both into letting her join their daily exercises.

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Back in the Common Room and feeling more human after the shower, Harry went straight to his girlfriend waiting on the couch, reading. How she always was faster than him, having long hair and being a girl, was beyond him. Ginny proved the stereotype to be somewhat true, as she always took ages in the shower, and would certainly show up late at breakfast, as usual, with her hair still wet and clothes a little damp due to the lack of proper towelling. His teenage mind would come up with several entertaining reasons for her long showers, but rational thoughts prevailed, making him realize that she might just like the always hot water and the lack of disruptions, compared to the Burrow.

Sitting down and planting a kiss on Hermione's cheek, he received a smile in return. "Hey there; you know, we must find a solution to our living arrangements," she whispered in his ear. "Sleeping alone doesn't do it for me anymore."

"Tell me about it," Harry whispered, rising and pulling her with him. "At least you don't have to bother with Ron. That guy can clear whole forests in a single night," he joked while leading her to the exit and to the waiting breakfast.

Hermione huddled herself against his arm as they jostled themselves through the too small - for two, at least - passage, reluctant to let him go. "Well, that puts him in competition with Parvati. You wouldn't believe the noise her petite nose is able to produce."

"Really? I'd never thought..."

"But that's what silencing charms are for, aren't they?" she cheekily added.

Chatting happily about stuff like only young couples can do, they made their way down to the already well-filled Great Hall, not knowing that the good day was about to end.

Down there they sat at their usual places furthest away from the head table, and began loading their plates with scones, and some scrambled eggs in Harry's case. Hermione was just finished pouring them some tea to go with that when something was shouted over the din of breakfast that made her drop the teapot, shattering it and spilling the contents over the table.

"What's wrong with you, Weasley? Are you sulking because the Mudblood whore isn't spreading her legs for you anymore?"

Malfoy had his back turned on them, and either not knowing that Harry and Hermione were attending breakfast already, or very well aware of it, had accosted Ron at his now usual seat at the middle of the table, ever since he sat with Dean and Seamus at the feast. The Slytherin would-be prince probably was still remembering the last year, as his position in the inquisitorial squad allowed him to go scott-free when spouting his venom whenever he liked to. He laughed loudly at the venomous glare he received from the three Gryffindor boys in front of him.

While Hermione felt tears of shame well in her eyes at being insulted so vilely in public, Harry had already reacted and risen. With a wave of his wand - he barely refrained from pulling the hidden battle wand - he sent a powerful wordless bludgeoning hex at Draco. The boy noticed the hex at the last second, proving that he actually had watched out for Harry's reaction, and spun around to dodge, while trying to block it with his arms, protecting his chest and head.

The hex impacted with a resounding crack, sending the boy flying arse over teakettle, and landing on his side. The resulting cries of pain and the fact that the blond boy was cradling his right arm with his left as he squirmed on the stone floor proved the assumption that he had broken at least one bone.

That fact didn't mean much to Harry, who continued stalking towards his prone enemy, his intent to deal even more punishment readily evident for all to see. The students near the fallen Slytherin were trying to put as much distance as possible between the two combatants, while still keeping a good line of sight on the events, while some of the students at Slytherin table rose and reached for their wands.

When Professor Snape rose to interfere, Dumbledore chose that precise moment to act.

"Everybody stop!" he yelled, his loud voice easily carrying throughout the Hall.

"Professor Snape, I believe that these insults have been addressed adequately already. I don't believe that Mister Malfoy should be punished beyond the point he already has been," he said, while looking intently at his subordinate. Snape frowned, but clearly got the message and sat down, glaring as if he wanted to roast someone on a spit, most probably the 'Potter brat'.

Dumbledore smiled benignly as he turned to address the resident nurse, who still sat there, stunned, the fork halfway to her mouth. "Madam Pomfrey, would you please escort Mister Malfoy to the Infirmary?"

Startled into action, the matron jumped up and started to round the table to reach the whimpering student on the floor.

Unnoticed in the general clutter, Harry hadn't stopped and was still approaching Malfoy, but still a good two dozen feet away. He moved slowly, as if each of these steps took great efforts. And still, he radiated such anger that the students sitting along the path he took were instinctively cringing away, fighting their own flight reflex.

"Mister Potter!" Dumbledore said loudly, but to now avail. Still, Harry slowly stalked toward his downed adversary, his nostrils flaring with every step he took.

Dumbledore didn't have the record for the least students killed under his watch for nothing - ok, the fact that the international ban on dueling was instigated did help - but still, he immediately noticed the danger signs. Showing the age-defying agility he was famous for, he vaulted the table and took a few quick steps forward.

"Mister Potter!" he called again, while quickly flicking his wand in a intricate pattern as he did so, casting a shield dome over Pomfrey and her charge.

This finally caught the attention of the boy in question, who stopped and looked defiantly at the old man approaching and stopping between him and his prey, his wand hand tightening its grip slightly as he glared at the Headmaster.

"I believe that this unfortunate matter has been settled, hasn't it?" Albus Dumbledore said, looking intently at Harry.

At first, Harry was tempted to tell the man to bugger off, that he had the right to flay Malfoy; but since one of his long term goals depended on the cooperation with the Headmaster, he kept his temper. Taking a deep breath, he reluctantly managed to give a nod, only to immediately raise his empty hand to signal that he had something to add.

"Almost - there is one thing left to say," Harry spoke, before straightening up and staring at the blonde idiot whining as the nurse waved her wand over Malfoy's arm.

"You are lucky that you are too young to be formally called to a duel. Especially as there is no honor in beating a pathetic excuse for a wizard like you are. But since you are eager to step in the criminal footsteps of your father, you leave me no choice," he said, straightening up and raising his wand.

The whole crowd jumped a little as he did so, even though he had it pointed upward. Dumbledore squinted his eyes a little, but didn't interfere, secure that his shield around the Malfoy boy would allow him to sit things out.

When Harry finally spoke instead of casting, Dumbledore was as shocked by the words as everyone else in the vicinity.

"Draco Malfoy, for the repeated transgressions by thee and the upstart House Malfoy in general, thee and thy mother are hereby cast out of the Ancient House of Black. If thee and thy family do not cease to harass me and mine, I will be forced to swear vengeance on the insignificant House of Malfoy. Heed my warning! So I spoke, and so mote it be!" he shouted, using the formal speech of the old ways, and ignoring the gasps echoing through the Great Hall as his wand flashed and signed his actions.

No one could deny the validity of this measure. Legally, Harry would have been alright to duel Malfoy to the death for the insult to his betrothed, if only the boy had been of age. Even a bludgeoning curse as direct response was not excessive, given the type of insult delivered. In the eye of the public, Potter was actually acting rather restrained.

Thus said, Harry gave a nod at the Headmaster, turned, and left the Hall, gathering Hermione on his way out.

On his way out, Harry just barely heard the start of an impromptu speech by Dumbledore, in which the man expressed his hope that this was the first and last time that he would have to witness or hear about such a blatant misdemeanour by one of his students as Mister Malfoy had just performed.

While he was quite aware that Dumbledore was spinning the events for his own goals, he didn't care. He was too focused at the distressed girl trying to dig herself into his shoulder. He had some consoling to do.

*** Later that day ***

Transfiguration class was no fun at all.

The lesson topic, switching spells between vertebrae and insects wasn't that hard, at least now that Harry had actually read ahead and knew what he was supposed to do. It wasn't that he was disgusted by bugs like some of the more 'girly' girls like Lavender who was on the verge of breaking down at the prospect of touching a weevil. And frankly, he found his mouse looked cool with grasshopper legs, albeit it proved a bit challenging to confine it to the table.

It was the looks of their classmates that were grating on Harry's nerves.

Hermione had chosen the 'three wise monkeys' approach, and was completely focusing on the lesson, but Harry knew that she was more hurt than she showed. He had been with her in the empty classroom she had chosen to hide in.

At least she had stopped using girl's toilets. Hogwarts had a tradition of bad things happening to people crying in toilets.

Harry believed the worst thing had been that Ron hadn't risen to her defence like he always used to. In fact, instead of him jumping up or at least shouting at Malfoy, Harry was quite sure to have seen Ron actually giving Hermione a brief dark glance. Harry had purposely interfered swiftly and harshly before Ron might have said something derogatory. Hermione would have been devastated if he had.

Finally, the period found an end, but while they were putting their things away, they heard Professor McGonagall's voice rising over the din.

"Mister Potter, Miss Granger? Would you please stay after class?"

The couple finished packing their bags, and moved forward to meet Professor McGonagall. When the last student had left the room, she gave the two children a smile and informed them that the Headmaster had asked her to escort them to his office before lunch. Since they had a free period, they didn't have any reason to refuse. It took them just a minute of walking to follow their Professor to the Headmaster's office.

The Gargoyle had already stepped aside when they arrived, and McGonagall immediately led them up the stairs and into the room.

"Hello Professor, Miss Granger, Mister Potter." Dumbledore greeted them tiredly from behind his desk. "Please take a seat, everybody. Care for a lemon drop?" Harry couldn't help but smile at the offer. He doubted anyone else had ever taken up on that offer. Carefully avoiding eye contact, he politely waved off and waited for his girlfriend to sit down. McGonagall chose, like the last time, to rather keep standing behind her students. When Harry finally had taken a seat, too, Dumbledore cleared his throat, signalling the start of the meeting.

"I have made some inquiries since our last meeting, and it seems like I have done you a horrendous misdeed, Mister Potter," he started the long speech he had carefully formulated during the last few days.

"Most people think I am a genius and a master of all kinds of magic known to wizardkind, I am but a man, and thus, fallible. While I have accumulated knowledge of a vast amount of spells due to my long life and am rather capable in Transfiguration and Potions, I sorely lack in the area of Runes. Yes, I know a lot of ward patterns to use, but I lack the formal education in that areas, something I sorely regret, but lack the time and energy to correct," Dumbledore began his monologue, seemingly looking absently-mindedly out of the window.

Harry took the opportunity of the Headmaster's eyes being averted to look at the man; he was rather shocked to see how old the man seemed, and how spent he looked. That was exactly the effect the Headmaster had hoped for. His position in front of the window was chosen carefully. The harsh light in contrast to the dim lighting of the rest of the office made him look much older, and he had carefully increased the effect by staying up all night, taking care of some of the paperwork he had neglected over the summer. The Malfoy boy actually had done Dumbledore a favour by creating this incident. He hoped that the pair would think this was a spontaneous meeting instead of a carefully planned one.

"About fifteen years ago, that particular lack of knowledge came to roost when I was frantically looking for a way to protect the child of some fallen friends. Looking for some way to cement the protection Mister Potter's mother has left him, I found a pattern to bind someone's blood to wards," he said, ignoring the surprised look Professor McGonagall sent him at this admission.

"I was ecstatic - that would make these wards not only very powerful, but also nigh impenetrable to Voldemort, as it would include the power of the mother's sacrifice in the wards. And I was right - they stopped three attempts at your life before you were four, and by then, all attempts ceased."

After having said this, Dumbledore shook himself and turned back to face his guests. Minerva's deprecating expression was expected, but he had come to the conclusion that it would be less damaging if she heard it like this, instead as an accusation of malice by the kids. Still, it did hurt.

He warily looked at Harry, his feigned remorse so visible on his face that Harry didn't have the heart to look away instantly. That slight gesture made the elderly man's eyes light up with a small smile of well hidden triumph, and made him continue to speak.

"I honestly didn't know about the side effects this would result in. Since you still showed powerful accidental magic, and performed rather well at Hogwarts, I never would have thought that something was amiss. I know now that those draining effects must have been the worst when you stayed at Privet Drive and that powerless feeling must have been horrible for you," he said sorrowfully, sighing at that point to increase the dramatics.

"And for that, and the pain the release ritual you obviously went through must have caused you, I do apologize with all of my heart. I now can fully understand why you lost trust in me," Dumbledore finally said.

Harry had to keep from smiling when he realized that Dumbledore had once again come to the wrong conclusion. His hand was squeezed by Hermione, and with a short exchange of glances and a shake of his head, they agreed that they shouldn't tell him.

Seeing the couple exchange some meaningful looks, Albus Dumbledore sighed. He knew that Harry was still upset, since the boy had most obviously just signalled his girlfriend that he wasn't inclined to forgive him, yet. He really should have looked up those wards earlier and have helped with the release ritual, himself, maybe right after the tournament incident. Or after Sirius' death. This would have helped him tremendously in regaining the boy's trust. 'Water under the bridge...' he sighed. With the situation this desperate, he would need to make a concession.

'An insignificant one, at first,' he told himself, suppressing his smile. After all, he already had confirmed his suspicion that they went somewhere out of Britain by reading the Weasley girl. He assumed they went to where Sirius went hiding - which indicated that they were in the Caribbean, somewhere - he had nearly forgotten about the bird Black used when he reported in after his escape. He also knew that the Lovegood girl probably knew something, maybe even more than Miss Weasley, but he would never, ever, try to read that girl again.

"I feel I have to make amends to you because of this. In order to prove my good intentions, I will cease to ask about your whereabouts and residence last summer," Dumbledore spoke, his chest heaving as if it took him a lot of effort to let go of this topic. He gravely sighed, trying to increase the image he had put forward, before he spoke again, as if it were an afterthought, "But I hope you will be inclined to tell me how I could reach you, come next summer, in order to stay in contact in case of a sudden emergency or interesting news," he said.

Knowing very well from their reaction that this wasn't enough, Dumbledore knew he had to make another sacrifice. 'And since they

wouldn't make eye contact, anyway...' he thought, with another suppressed smile.

"And in order to calm your last fears about me," Dumbledore told the kids, before slowly reaching for his wand.

Harry and Hermione tensed slightly, their hands inching towards their own wands, but Dumbledore kept his wand in only two fingers, and pointed downward. Sighing in an overly dramatic, defeated way, Dumbledore gave them an oath he believed to be necessary, but acceptable. "I swear that I will not use Legilimency on any of you. On my magic, so mote it be!"

"I hope that you find it in your heart to forgive an old man for his presumptuousness and mistakes," Headmaster Dumbledore said when the flash of his oath had dissipated.

Harry was still a bit cautious; there were at least two or three ways he could think of on the fly to circumvent that oath. Pondering whether to trust the man or not, his eyes fell on the figure of Fawkes sitting on his perch in the corner. The fact that the bird hadn't left the Headmaster put his mind a bit at ease, and since he knew would probably need the Headmaster's help to survive Voldemort, he chose to take the high ground and offer an olive branch. He simply stood up and offered his hand. Dumbledore took but a second to stand and reach out, himself. After shaking it a few times, each time smiling a bit brighter, he released the hand and sat down.

"Thank you, my boy. Merlin knows that I needed some good news after the long discussion I just had with Professor Snape," Dumbledore chuckled. "To say that he was very upset about that incident at breakfast would be quite an understatement."

Casually coasting over the fact that he hadn't mentioned that incident until now, he turned to address Hermione. "That said; I apologize about what happened, Miss Granger. Something like that will never happen again, I assure you."

Hermione bristled at that. "While I appreciate the sentiment, I cannot believe that, Headmaster. As long as Malfoy can get away with anything, he will continue," she said testily.

"I wouldn't say that he can get away with everything. You surely are exaggerating a bit, quite understandable, I say, but nonetheless," Dumbledore replied, only digging his grave deeper as Hermione didn't relent, but bristled, with her renewed ire now completely directed at the elderly man in front of her.

"Really?" she asked coldly, her eyes squinting dangerously before she started to count points off on her fingers.

"He openly supports Voldemort; he has acted hostile against anyone not of pure blood ever since first year; every time he insults someone, Professor Snape hovers nearby to deal out punishment against anybody who dares to retaliate. Why, that little arrogant jerk is still Prefect, even after he blatantly abused his position in the inquisitorial squad to terrorize other students last year!" she nearly shrieked at the end.

"I still believe that he might be reformed if we don't vilify him and show him the error of his ways," Dumbledore fidgeted, looking down at his folded hands in his lap.

Even Professor McGonagall snorted at this point. "And how do you think he will ever change when he can do as he pleases without consequences? I appealed to you on this many times already, Albus! At least strip him of his prefectship, the incident today would be enough to have anybody removed," she told Dumbledore sharply, using her honed staring technique.

"But what would that prove? It would only drive him away faster," Dumbledore stubbornly stood by his opinion.

"It would prove that misbehaviour is going to get punished. It would prove that you care about the innocent, instead of just the guilty. I would bet Knuts for Galleons that he even carries the Dark Mark already," Harry said. The way that the Headmaster looked away for a short moment made him stop and stare at the man. He sincerely hoped that he had misread the man's body language, but Professor McGonagall's shout of outrage proved his assumption.

"Albus - how could you! You let a marked Death Eater into this school?"

"He still can be reformed - he is just young and confused," Dumbledore insisted.

Professor McGonagall glared wordlessly at her boss for a few seconds before she addressed the two students present, but without removing her eyes from him. "I believe you two should return to your common room. Your discussion with the Headmaster can wait until later, I have something administrative to discuss with him first," she nearly growled, her look at the Headmaster intensifying by the second.

"Now!" she hissed as the two didn't react immediately.

Smiling softly, Harry rose and helped Hermione to her feet, an unnecessary, but appreciated gesture. They gave their goodbyes and turned to leave, but Harry stopped again.

"Just one more thing, Headmaster - I meant what I said, Draco has one last chance. The next stupid stunt will be his last. You better inform Professor Snape of this so he can have a word with his protégé," he said, and led Hermione out. He could nearly feel the impact of the silencing charm on the door as soon as it fell shut. The Headmaster was really in for it.

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"Did you notice?" Harry asked in a whisper as they were a few steps away from the staircase.

"You mean his hand? Honestly, that would be hard not to notice at this distance. If we weren't so careful not to look at him, we would have seen at the first meeting, already," Hermione huffed. "The skin looked like parchment to me," she added.

"Yes, and it felt like it, too, dry and brittle, like a twig - and it was cold to the touch. It wasn't looking like that when we met after the ministry battle. I wonder what the story behind that is," he mused as he led his girlfriend around the corner and in a particular direction. Hermione's eyes lit up as she noticed the current course they were on, and gave his arm an affectionate squeeze.

"It might be interesting to bring it up later. But I doubt he would tell us. Really, that man can drive a nun to murder with his passive-

aggressive evasive routine," Hermione huffed. "I swear, if we didn't need to pick his brain so badly – Really! Did you notice the vague oath he had given to placate us? Honestly, does he think we are stupid? I swear, I could tell you a dozen ways on the spot how he could circumvent it, not considering the inherent feasibility..." Hermione started ranting about the Headmaster, while Harry just hugged her closer and smiled at her antics as they continued towards their target.

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They spent the rest of their free period in the library, where Hermione made Harry study for their Defence NEWT, something Harry didn't need much pushing with. Since they were at approximately the same level in the theoretical part of that course, it was a rather productive hour they spent there. Hermione had made them a study schedule for their year, and was estimating them being ready for their NEWTs in April, May - tops.

The prospect of finishing some classes a year early made Hermione positively giddy, and Harry greatly benefited from that once they left the library. He found out that there were twelve cupboards on the way back to the Common Room, for instance.

At lunch, Dumbledore casually announced that Blaise Zabini was taking over the sixth year male Slytherin prefect position, but without stating any reason. After all, everybody knew the reason; the incident was more than public. Draco looked murderous, Snape just glared at Harry, and McGonagall looked suspiciously smug.

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A few days later, Hermione had finished the Potions Book, and after some research in the library and some test potions brewed proved the addendums to be right, she copied them into her own book. Harry planned to do so as well, once his own copy would finally arrive. The old book had some pages that barely held on, and - except for the additions - was the same as the newer version. They tried some very interesting spells described in it, but also had a discussion about who the 'Halfblood Prince', the last owner according to the inscription inside the book, could have been. Harry claimed that a 'Prince' should be male, but Hermione differed. They decided to agree to disagree after a heated discussion, and

Hermione promised that she would find out who 'she' had been in the library.

A second later, they began to make up by snogging, ignoring the wolf-whistles and cheers from the others in the common room.

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When both finished with perfect results on the Anti-snoring potion the next class, Slughorn nearly soiled himself while he praised both to the skies. After class, he made both accept invitations to an informal meeting at his quarters in about a week.

He tried to be charming by telling Hermione that he had expected her to be there anyway as partner of Harry, but only thought it to be polite to invite her on her own. Hermione smiled, but looked right through that flimsy attempt to woo her.

*** September 12th ***

Professor McGonagall stood outside the Charms classroom, waiting, when the Gryffindor students vacated said room. "Miss Granger, Mister Potter, could we have word, please?" she curtly spoke as she spotted them in the crowd.

"Of course, Professor," Hermione replied brightly.

Professor McGonagall waited a few moments until most of the students were out of immediate earshot, before she came to the point. "Headmaster Dumbledore asked me to escort you to another meeting, tonight after dinner," she said, her face even harder than usual. Hermione was slightly disturbed by that sight, and more than puzzled, until she finally came to a sudden realization.

"Oh! We're sorry, Professor. Of course, all these meetings are cutting into your schedule!" she gasped. After a short moment of introspection, she turned to Harry. "Do we really need to draw on Professor McGonagall? I mean, we do have a truce with the Headmaster, so to speak," she asked, winking surreptitiously at him out of sight of their head of house.

"Of course not. Please accept our apologies for the inconvenience caused and our sincere thanks for your assistance in this matter,"

Harry addressed their Professor. The stern woman actually gave him a slight smile in response.

"Very well, Mister Potter. I shall retire to my office, then. Please do not hesitate to call on me if you find yourself in need of my assistance again. Miss Granger, Mister Potter," she said, nodded and walked away in a brisk pace.

"What exactly was this?" Harry inquired as soon as they were alone, steering her towards the longer route to the library.

"Harry, honestly. I think I shall introduce you to the works of Machiavelli," Hermione laughed as she hooked her arm into his.

"That's the dictatorship guy, isn't he?"

"That's a really simplistic view, but it is essentially correct," Hermione replied mirthfully.

"How about you tell me why we now are without a chaperone, and I read it up later?"

"Don't play stupid. We didn't get her on our side just to alienate her again by needlessly wasting her time," Hermione admonished him. Harry smiled impishly as he ducked his head in reply. Hermione shook her head with bright laughter as he did so.

"And if Dumbledore reneges on his promise?"

"Then she will come down on our side of the fence. We are the ones making the peace offering here, remember?"

"Right, so we'll face him alone, this time," Harry replied evenly as they took the last turn and came in sight of the library. "And the next times - I'm afraid Dumbledore has made a standing appointment for these meetings," he chuckled.

Hermione laughed along with Harry, but couldn't dismiss that theory out of hand.

*** later, the Headmaster's office ***

"Mister Potter, Miss Granger! Please come in - take a seat!" Albus Dumbledore was his jovial self, the former disagreement forgotten as if there never had been any.

"Where is Professor McGonagall? I thought she would accompany you?" He asked when he noticed that they had showed up without a chaperone.

"As we have come to an agreement, we thought it wouldn't be necessary to waste her time," Harry warily replied, still a bit wary that Dumbledore might change his mind again. Nonetheless, he smiled friendly and did as they had been told.

"Indeed, my boy, indeed," Dumbledore said with a satisfied smile before he spoke the magical words that marked the start of a meeting in his office.

"Care for a lemon drop?"

Both teens declined politely, something Dumbledore took in stride. After all, less than a handful had taken him up on this offer for a decade, at least. That only meant more drops for him.

"It elates my old heart to see that we can put our differences aside and work together for the good of all people," Dumbledore began with great pathos, something he was famous for. That and the garish colours he usually wore. The baby-blue robes with green moving stars on it that he wore today were no exception to that rule.

"I have planned, during the early summer, for us to review some memories of Voldemort and his past, in order to understand our enemy better. I had planned to start these reviews as soon as you had set foot into Hogwarts, but alas, most plans never survive contact with reality, they say," he spoke as he rose from his throne-like seat. Behind his back, he missed the two pairs of eyes rolling silently at his cheap shot at guilt-tripping them.

"I'd like to start with the memory of Bob Ogden, an Employee of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Thankfully, I was able to persuade him to cede these memories to our cause," Dumbledore said while opening the cabinet that stored his pensive.

"What is it about?" Hermione asked enquiringly. She never had used a pensive before and was eager to have that experience, eyeing the huge stone basin hungrily.

"It is about a visit he had made during his active years in the Department," Dumbledore said, while he poured a silvery liquid into the pensive and stirred it with his wand.

"Is it safe to enter that memory? Can we get hurt inside of this?" Hermione asked, pointing at the bowl that was only a foot and half in diameter.

"As Mister Potter can attest, it's not painful, and quite safe. We can't interact with it, nor can we be harmed in any way. While in there, we are bodily there and at the same time, we are not. For instance, we can't even cast spells. I can also assure you that we will be expelled from the pensive as soon as the memory has ended," Dumbledore said, chuckling at her expression.

While feeling slightly more confident after that explanation, Hermione still was shocked when Dumbledore was sucked into the bowl like into a giant vacuum hose. Harry cast a few powerful locking spells at the doors and windows, just in case, and then followed the Headmaster without a second thought. Showing her Gryffindor traits, she swallowed her fear and did like he did, landing next to Harry - after a few seconds of falling through some kind of mist, like some weird kind of portkey travel - on some lane in the country, Dumbledore stood next to them.

Amazed, they were watching the incident of Ogden entering the Gaunt house - or better hovel - occupied by Marvolo Gaunt, his son Morfin and daughter Merope, trying to arrest the younger Gaunt man for hexing a Muggle. Harry had to translate partially, since all the Gaunt's seemed to be Parselmouths and were talking parseltongue amongst each other. The whole thing rapidly escalated into a scene of domestic violence as the father started to lay into his near squib daughter for being attracted to a Muggle named Tom Riddle, and culminated in a pell-mell escape by Ogden as the men turned their rage on him. It took not long until they felt a soaring feeling, and then landed hard on their feet in the Headmaster's office.

Surprisingly, Dumbledore said nothing when Harry removed the locking charms from the doors and windows.

A few minutes later, Dumbledore had explained who they had met in that hovel near Little Hangleton, and how the rest of that story turned out, with Merope seducing Tom Riddle via love-potions, which ultimately lead to the birth of Tom Marvolo Riddle. Apparently, once her pregnancy showed, she naively thought he would stay with her because of the child and quit the potions and told him about magic. Riddle left her immediately.

"Sad story," Hermione said when Dumbledore was done. "She died, didn't she? I remember something about Voldemort being raised in an orphanage, didn't you say so?"

"Yes, as far as I know, she died after giving birth - surviving only long enough to name him," Dumbledore sadly said, taking a seat at his desk. "But that is a tale for another evening."

"Very well, a good evening to you, Headmaster," Harry replied, raising from the seat and extending a hand to his girlfriend. Once she was on her feet, they moved to leave the office, when Harry's eye fell on some trinket on a shelf behind Dumbledore. Although it had apparently seen some fire damage, and had a crack in the stone, it was still recognizable.

"Hey, isn't that the ring Marvolo wore?"

Dumbledore raised his head from a paper he was reading. "Please? Oh, this ring - yes, it is. I came into its possession early this July."

"Funny coincidence," Harry said, as he opened the door and led Hermione out. "We have Merope's locket at home."

ooOOoo

AN:

"What is it?" DerLaCroix asked as he looked up from his desk where he studied some new 'business' proposals.

"I want to introduce you to our newest core minion, Boss. This is Alix, from Controlling," Embi reported as she put the folder on the desk.

The Dark Lord Cliffy took the folder and leafed lazily through it. "Controlling, you say? That's accounting branch, right? Why did she qualify?"

"Oh, she had some rather nice proposals to join human resources and controlling, creating synergy effects," Embi replied curtly. When her Lords eyebrow rose inquisitively, she continued.

"First, detaching them from accounting makes it possible to expand the 'Controlling' aspect to global scale," she began, to which DerLaCroix nodded approvingly, actually looking at the new team member, for the first time.

"Also, she already had an idea to help us to eliminate our biggest fixed cost, body-bags and postal fees for disposal of minion remains," Embi stated, but shut up as her boss raised his hand.

"Really?" He said silkily. "That would be a huge boost to our profits. How do you plan to achieve this without lowering our standards?" he addressed the woman.

"My Lord," Alix spoke without hesitation, "I think it is about time that we put some emphasis on the 'Resources' aspect of Human Resources. With a small change in work-flow, we can reduce postal weight by up to fifty percent."

"Impressive. And the remaining cost? Fees, bags, and I assume there will be some extra expenses as well? How do you plan to deal with that?"

"This shan't be a problem. My calculations imply that these will be more than covered by the revenues of our new range of soap-based products," Alix replied evenly.

ooOOoo

Again many thanks to my beta readers, Embi, alix, and now, Joe Lawyer.

Joe, I'm glad we could resolve this misunderstanding, and even more glad you've joined the team

(I'm also slightly proud that my minions are obviously well trained, and will attack anyone they deem to be a threat to their beloved master. I actually cherish bad reviews as much as good ones, and I think the progress in my writing can be seen during this story.)

You might notice that Hermione has a different relation to the book now, that she got to read it first. After all, she later used that Mufflatio spell rather heavy-handed, although she at first despised the usage. It was rather obvious that she did all this because she was annoyed at Harry in general because of the book. I guess that if he simply had lent it to her in the original series, much would have gone different.

So move on, move on , nothing to see here...

Singled out minions:

wwwendy - I had you there for a moment, didn't I? Be assured, it won't be a greater demon...

Sweden's Pride - Thank you. Seriously - you gave me a great gift with that review.

timunderwood9 - Your reviews are good. I really like them. The thing about the pace is something that is in part planned, in part something occurring naturally. When this story started, Harry kicked over an anthill. The first couple of chapters happened within a handful of days... It's not hard to keep the story fast-paced if you write 'live'. But life doesn't happen at fast pace all the time. Even wars do have their calm periods. They came to rest, and than did something stupid that nearly got them killed. They recovered and found some place to hide. While there, they trained, made plans and put them in motion. Just imagine I'd kept the pace from the beginning - we'd still be in July, and Harry would have had a heart attack.

Chapter 19: Time and tide wait for no man.

*** September 12th, the corridor to the Headmaster's office ***

"Harry! Harry! Wait!"

Bewildered, Harry stopped walking and chatting to Hermione, and turned around. No one else than Albus Dumbledore was calling for him, running after them, his baby blue robes hiked up to show some spindly, pale legs and bright yellow oriental slippers with long, upward turned points. 'Strange, I had pegged him for a bunny slipper type,' Harry thought - a surreal thought spurred by a surreal experience.

"Come with me, quick!" Dumbledore said when he reached them, leading them quickly back to the office they just left.

Dumbledore threw the door closed as soon as they had entered. "You have the locket?" he asked, grabbing Harry's arms with both hands, nearly shaking the boy in excitement.

"Sorry! I got carried away," he quickly apologized as Harry shrugged the hands off. "You really have the locket?" he inquired again.

"Yes, I do think so. We found it at Grimmauld Place this summer," Harry replied.

"Actually, we had found it there a year ago, when we were cleaning the house with the Weasleys," Hermione corrected. "We found it in a cabinet full of dark stuff. We couldn't open it, so we threw it away."

The Headmaster blanched at that. "You tried to open it?" he asked breathlessly.

Harry nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Remember? I even banged it against a table a couple of times in order to open it, but it wouldn't," he said, grinning at Hermione, not noticing the Headmaster nearly swooning at his proclamation, just out of his sight.

"I remember," Hermione said, glaring at Harry for some reason. "Given what happened to Kreacher, you got away lucky, Potter."

Harry flinched as he realized how he had dodged that bullet by sheer luck. "Uh-hum. It seemed a good idea back then," he admitted sheepishly, while Hermione tapped her foot, rolling her eyes in annoyance.

"What happened to Kreacher, and the Locket?" Dumbledore interrupted their banter. Both could see that the man was visibly distraught for some reason. He looked rather pale around the nose and eyes. As this was the only part of his face readily visible due to his beard, it had to suffice.

"We found the locked near his scorched remains - it had burned a hole through his chest. He seemed to have worn it around his neck and somehow, he managed to open it. At least it was open when we found it," Hermione reported how they had come into possession of the locket.

"So it has been destroyed?"

"It showed some minor damage from the heat, but is still mostly intact. Why are you interested in it?" Hermione asked, before she hit her forehead with her right hand. "Of course! How stupid! It's Slytherin's Locket. It's an irreplaceable artefact of the Founders - it's priceless, especially for Hogwarts."

Dumbledore had stumbled to his seat while Hermione did her monologue. Heavily, he sat and stared out of the window. "If only," he sadly whispered too softly to be heard, before straightening.

"I must do some tests on the Locket - may I see it?" he pleaded at Harry.

Harry didn't mind. "No problem, Headmaster. We can surely arrange that over the holidays."

"I would rather see it immediately," Dumbledore replied in an eager way.

"I could fetch in less than an hour, provided I am allowed to leave the castle," Harry retorted, sensing that this might be important. But since Hermione wasn't of age, yet, they technically weren't allowed to leave.

"Do this, my boy!" Dumbledore said, writing a note on a piece of parchment, which he handed to Harry. "Take this to Professor McGonagall and have her escort you, for safety."

"Is it safe to handle?" Hermione demanded. The Headmaster's behaviour had made her wary.

Dumbledore thought a moment before answering. "It should be. You touched it before, even when it was intact, and nothing happened. But to be sure, better levitate it into a box and do not touch it."

"But the Underage Decree..." Hermione replied, earning herself a sly smile from Dumbledore.

"Miss Granger, I am very well aware that the Ministry can't track underage magic in a Fidelius protected home, just as well as you are. Or do you want to make me believe that you both developed your knack for word- and motionless casting overnight?" he told her with twinkling eyes, laughing softly.

Harry joined the laughter and pulled his sputtering girlfriend towards the exit.

ooOOoo

Thirty-five minutes later, Harry handed a pink Tupperware box over to Dumbledore, who raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"It was the first box with a lid I found," Harry answered the unspoken question with a shrug, slightly annoyed. He had to answer that question twice, already.

Dumbledore turned the box over in his hands, and looked for the hinges or nails that kept it closed. Finally, he pulled at the lid, which came half open with a loud pop. "Interesting," Dumbledore said and pushed the lid shut, getting another pop, only to pull it open again and examine the edges of the box and lid, and how they worked together.

"Albus! Aren't there more pressing matters to tend to?" Professor McGonagall chided her superior. Sometimes, he could be as bad as Arthur Weasley when it came to Muggles and their concoctions.

When it was important enough to warrant her escorting a student to London to fetch some object immediately and at haste, he should at least pay more attention to that thing than to the box it came in.

"Of course, Minerva," Dumbledore replied absentmindedly, putting the lid onto his table, no doubt for later inspection.

Now focussing on the task at hand, Albus Dumbledore gave the locket in the box a thoughtful look and examination. It was Slytherin's Locket, without question. Minerva's gasp in the background signalled that she had identified the artefact, too.

"Mister Potter! How did you come into possession of it?" Minerva McGonagall nearly screamed as she whirled around to address the boy. "This is an invaluable historical object! Would you be interested in a lend agreement with Hogwarts?" she said while Dumbledore drew his wand and began to cast inspection spells at the locket, each more obscure than the other.

"We would agree to a ten year exhibit for starters, if we could receive joint quarters," Hermione took advantage of the situation. Harry blushed brightly at the unexpected candour of his girlfriend, and even Dumbledore failed an incantation as he broke into laughter at his Deputy's face. McGonagall was warring with herself, worrying her lip - she couldn't condone, much less facilitate, such behaviour, but it was in exchange for a Founder's Heirloom!

"Minerva, please, although I know your love for the Founders, you know that this is not possible," Dumbledore said with a chuckle. "But I believe Mister Potter would gladly have that Locket displayed at Hogwarts in his name, anyway. By the way, could you please go and remind all the staff that this term's mandatory weekly meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, five to seven p.m.?" he said innocently.

"Why should I, Albus? You already..." Professor McGonagall began, only to notice the twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes and the bright smiles on her student's faces. Sighing deeply, she acknowledged the deal.

"I will remind them, Headmaster. Mister Potter, Miss Granger, please be aware that I will be very disappointed if this administrative information leaves this office," she said frostily, and with a nod to her

boss, she left the room. 'It's for Slytherin's Locket,' she reminded herself as she pulled the door shut behind her.

"Would you mind to leave me this trinket for a while for some tests, Mister Potter?" Dumbledore asked after they were alone again. When Harry agreed, he bid them goodbye and watched them leave. 'What a pity. He would surely have turned into a really good wizard,' he thought sadly as the boy left, contemplating what cruel fate the boy was destined to. Then he shook his head and banished that thought for now. He had some important tests to do.

ooOOoo

The rest of September went by in a uniform flow of classes, study, practice and make-out sessions. Only a few days stood out in memory.

The first Quidditch practice on September 14th, for example was one candidate. Since the team had lost its Beaters, the Keeper and two of the Chasers, it was nothing else but a huge tryout. All in all, only Harry and Katie remained from last year's team. Katie had been made Captain, something that both agreed was only a slight against Harry, since Katie had read in the papers about the state of relations between the Headmaster and Harry at the time the badge was given to her. Given the fact that she was in her NEWT year, and Harry the next oldest team mate, it would have been clear that he should have gotten the badge. They agreed that they would share the burden, as Katie had less time, and they split off to review their candidates, Katie putting the Chasers and Keepers through a wringer, while Harry played target for the Beater prospects.

Most of the trial was easy. Apart from choosing Ginny and a girl named Demelza for Chasers, a no-brainer given Ginny's flying and Demelza's skill at dodging Bludgers, Dean made it reserve Chaser, something that he would surely be rewarded for by Ginny later. The Beaters were rather easy to replace, since only two boys, named Peakes and Coote, were any good. At least they were better than Kirke and Sloper, but that wasn't exactly rocket science.

The whole experience of Keeper tryout, on the other hand, was difficult to describe properly: Catch-22, Hobson's choice, between Scylla and Charybdis, between a rock and a hard place, between the hammer and the anvil, between two fires, cornered, in a dilemma,

in a pickle, sitting on a powder keg, or the good old 'pick your poison'.

It was not so much that the two contenders were incompetent, not at all, but they were Ron and an arrogant asshole named Cormac McLaggen. Both were about equal in skill, but what Ron lacked in confidence, McLaggen more than compensated in pure assholery.

In the end they - or better Katie - chose Ron, because of McLaggen's very smooth attempts to offer Katie to 'go out' with her, which he made near the end of the tryouts. She might have knocked a tooth loose when she rejected his proposal.

ooOOoo

"Did you see Katie slapping that jerk?" Harry gasped, nearly doubled over in laughter as he met Hermione by the stands after he had changed. "I wish she had a beater's bat at hand. He was driving me mad with his running commentary about how bad all the others were and what he would do in their stead."

"What did he say to her?" Hermione inquired curiously. Of course she had seen how Katie had punched that boy to the ground and had continued yelling at him as he laid there, clutching his nose.

"She only told us that he offered to 'earn' his position - what a stupid jerk!" Harry told her through his laughter, reaching out for his girlfriend and her bag.

Hermione joined his laughter and graciously let Harry take her book bag to carry it. "Come on, it's still some time left, care for a walk around the lake?" Harry asked, knowing that Hermione wouldn't resist such an offer. As predicted, Hermione happily agreed. What Harry didn't predict was that they ran into Hagrid when they made it a few steps around the stands.

"Oh, hullo Harry, Hermione!" sounded his voice from above their heads.

"Hagrid! Nice to meet you, what are you doing here?" Harry beamed back, but quickly noticed that something was wrong with his biggest friend. "Has anything happened?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"Oh, nuthin'," Hagrid said, hastily cleaning his face with a wipe of his coat. That action only made his puffy face stand even more out. Harry and Hermione exchanged a look while Hermione stated, "Doesn't look like 'nothing' to me, Hagrid. What's wrong with you? Maybe we can help you?"

The reply consisted in Hagrid letting out a pained wail, before he cleaned his nose in the tablecloth he used as handkerchief. "It's Aragog - he's old. Won' make it much longer, the ol' chap," Hagrid blurted before getting all tears once more.

"Aragog?" Hermione whispered at Harry, who mouthed 'giant spider king' at her while Hagrid went on wailing about how he raised that monster from the egg on. Hermione shuddered as she remembered what Harry had told her about that particular adventure. She was actually quite glad that she was petrified during that part of the year, especially since that meant that Ron had to deal with these spiders. On second thought, she should find some spiders for Ron sometimes. She still owed him one for the stunt at the twin's shop.

They consoled Hagrid for a few more minutes, but finally they had to make their excuses, since they were expected at the 'Slug club' meeting tonight.

To their surprise, that meeting actually wasn't half bad, if you ignored that most of the people around were just invited because the host was trying to get in their good graces. Harry and Hermione had a brilliant time there, with Neville and a surprisingly also attending Ginny.

Ginny had gotten an impromptu invitation instead of a detention after she had hexed McLaggen in the halls, where Slughorn had seen them. The ass had badmouthed her performance on the pitch, claiming she and Ron got their places because they knew Harry; completely ignoring the fact that it was Katie's decision - she was Captain, after all. Slughorn was mightily impressed by her bat bogey hex, and told everybody in range about how far she would make it. Ginny took it in stride, focussing on her snacks and the conversation with her friends as they milled around the room, the group always surreptitiously staying as far as possible away from Slughorn - who had gotten a bit tipsy as the party had moved on and thus louder in his praises of whomever he was talking to at the moment.

During the party, Ginny eventually managed to trick Hermione into revealing that the beach vacation had indeed occurred in the Caribbean, on a Black property. Hermione had subsequently declared that this was to be kept secret, or she would learn how to obliviate and use this to erase the knowledge of potty training from the girl's memory. Harry then proceeded to explain to the properly cowed Ginny and Neville how to avoid Snape's legilimency, and agreed to instruct them, along with Luna, in a sort of mini-DA.

*** The next Tuesday ***

"Sure it's safe?" Hermione cautiously commented as they stepped into the Room of Requirement, now showing a rather accurate copy of their room in Black Manor.

"Dumbledore won't dare to go back on his agreement. McGonagall wouldn't even acknowledge she knows about this deal. Snape looks straight through us as if we don't exist. And we're in the Room of Requirement while all teachers are at their meeting," Harry ticked off on his fingers.

Reaching for and taking hold of her shoulders, he bowed to get his mouth right next to her ear. "You're only nervous about what I have in mind for you, aren't you," he growled softly, letting shivers run down her spine.

Turning her head, she involuntary had to swallow as the intensity in his look seemed to double as he pointed towards the bed. "Strip, and on all fours," he commanded with that damnable grin she adored so much.

While she complied, Harry stripped as well, but then put his belt back on, around his hips. He then adjusted it so that it sat three inches below his belly button.

Hermione slightly regretted her - now in hindsight - imprudent teasing during their fencing practice as Harry conjured ropes to secure her, moved into position behind her, and then proceeded to charm the belt hovering between his pelvis and her buttocks with a stinging charm.

ooOOoo

Without warning, nor any means to escape, September 19th arrived, a day Hermione had dreaded since the middle of summer. She didn't want to hint at it, but she sincerely hoped that Harry had planned something. Over the last years, her birthday had mostly passed without much fanfare, maybe a quick recognition and a generic 'some friend' present. But this year, not only she had a boyfriend-slash-fiancé, it was her seventeenth birthday. She was officially an adult now!

Hiding her inner restlessness perfectly, she slowly stepped down into the common room, at their customary early time. To her great joy, she was welcomed by a spinning hug and happy kiss by a merry boyfriend and her friends. Ginny and Neville were congratulating her to her 'big day', and then they left for the Room of Requirement. Luna joined them as soon as they were out of the door, wishing her a happy seventeenth-one-fifth birthday. Hermione eyed the Ravenclaw girl warily. That number was alarmingly close to her own estimate for the time-turner use in third year for classes, homework and extra studies. The others, except for Harry, laughed at what they thought a brilliant Luna joke, and dragged Hermione with them, making it impossible to make a subtle inquiry about how Luna gained that knowledge, and quickly, they had forgotten about it. Their good mood got a dampener when they ran into Nott on the way to the room, but the lone Slytherin wisely retreated quickly without comment.

As the group entered the Room of Requirement, Hermione was delighted. Instead of their normal training room, it was a rather good copy of the drawing room in Grimmauld Place #12, her favourite room to lounge and relax, with a good book and a boyfriend in snogging range, preferably. A moment later, a good breakfast and an iced cake were waiting on the table between the couches, courtesy of the elves. Harry had to do nothing but ask; they were actually delighted to have extra work to do.

Harry helped her into her favourite seat, without hovering annoyingly over her, something she resented with a passion. She magnanimously allowed him to serve her tea and cake, smiling and chatting happily with her friends. Finally, Ginny started the obligatory round of gift-giving, handing a tidily wrapped package to Hermione. Hermione happily tore the wrapping off the box of Honeydukes Finest. While that was not exactly a personal gift, Hermione very well knew that this was a rather expensive gift for the girl in

notorious dire strait, and thanked her more enthusiastically than Ginny had expected. The resulting return hug turned out especially rib bruising.

Neville gave her a book about magical plants of the Caribbean, a thoughtful and useful present - and just personal enough to not be insulting. Neville blushed brightly when Hermione gave him a thank-you peck on the cheek, and to everybody's surprise, Ginny added her own to the other cheek. Luna couldn't let this slide and went straight for the centre; kissing Neville directly on the lips. It was a rather chaste kiss, more like a peck, but Neville nearly had an apoplexy when those lips drew closer.

Luna gave Hermione her gift, of course wrapped in the most garish green-yellow patterned wrapping paper ever seen by man. It was made even worse that the borders between the colours were moving, undulating and bending - forming patterns that Hermione was sure laughed at the concept of Euclidean geometry. She kept the paper for later study, and blushed at the present, a book about sexual positions possible by clever spellwork.

"Be sure to take notes on the suggestions, I might borrow them some time," Luna said, absently-mindedly brushing some lint, imaginary or real - no one could really tell with Luna, and to her, the borders on that were fluid, anyway - from Neville's shoulder. Poor Neville barely avoided his second near-fatal seizure at this action, missing how Ginny smiled brightly at Luna, and gave her a conspiratorial wink. Hermione could now clearly see the conspiracy against the poor boy and guessed that by the end of year, Neville would either be Luna's boyfriend or dead. 'Or maybe both, in either order...' she mentally corrected herself - they were talking about Luna, after all.

Harry concluded the gift presentation by handing Hermione a rather long package. Neville and Ginny immediately began discussing what broomstick that might be, while Luna assumed a collapsible totem pole.

When Hermione had removed the packing paper, a polished wooden box came into view. Ginny immediately corrected her guess, stating with authority that this must be a Nimbusbroom transport case. Hermione was a bit disappointed by this. A broomstick to make her fly with him would be a nice gift, but a somewhat selfish one, since she still didn't like flying that much. At least it wasn't a

book - books from her friends were expected, but from Harry, it would be very disappointing.

Hiding her disappointment, she opened the box, and gaped at the long, slender wooden rod in there. One end had an ornate brass cap for protection and the other side a double-circle hilt and a grip. No bristles, but a grip. A smallsword style hilt and grip. A scrimshaw ebony grip with golden pommel and a golden shell-style hilt, the two halves resembling clam shells. With a quick turn, Hermione hurled herself at Harry, tackling him and his seat to the ground while she devoured his lips. Luna's wolf whistles and comments made her realize that they still had company, but the smouldering look she gave Harry while she climbed off him promised him that she would make that present worth every Knut .

With a practised move, she took the sword and unsheathed it, the blade singing during the motion as it flicked through the air. She expertly whirled and trusted a few times against an unseen enemy, getting more and more exited - just like her audience, once it became clear to Luna and Neville that she knew how to use that 'poker'.

"Harry! I love it! It's perfect!" she squealed. "Where did you get that?"

"Well I couldn't just let you use a slowly disintegrating transfigured sword anymore, so I nicked it and went to Lenny to comission a copy worthy of you," Harry chuckled.

"It's a Lenny's?" Hermione squealed and looked the blade over. Of course, on the unsharpened part of the blade under the hilt - called a ricasso, she remembered - there were the sharpness runes and rune-sets to make it unbreakable - and Lenny's mark, the crossed bones, causing her to smile even wider.

"Look at the pommel," Harry hinted ominously, and Hermione examined the yet unknown markings on it. She then calmly sheathed the blade, put it back onto the table, and launched herself a second time at her fiancé.

While they were occupied, Ginny took a look at the pommel, curious of what had caused the current attack. There were two images, one

on each side, which looked like coats of arms. "Figures," Neville said after a short look at them. "Those are the Black and Potter crests."

While Ginny went on about what a sweet gesture those crests were, Luna interrupted her and asked if they shouldn't provide the two with a comfortable bed or couch, for she would like to take some notes on their other techniques, as well. This comment was odd enough to even stop Hermione's oral abuse of Harry's lips. Luna just moped about the lost opportunity as the couple separated without coupling.

The rest of the impromptu party continued with a short demonstration of their fencing to Luna and Neville, which Harry won by a hair's breadth, and some brief and funny lessons to the other three. Finally, it was time to pack and return to their dorms to stow the gifts and get their book bags for Charms class this morning.

"Too bad we can't carry them," Hermione sighed while putting the newly christened 'Venus' back into the case to transport 'her' somewhat covertly. "It would be reassuring to have some ace in the sleeve, just in case."

"You don't have to tell me. I tried to come up with a solution, but it's too awkward carrying a concealed blade around. Especially since it is explicitly forbidden in Hogwarts," Harry replied with a sad face. "But you're right, it would be cool," he agreed with a longing look in his eyes.

ooOOoo

"Hey Harry? How about some flying after class?" asked Ron after Charms class was finished.

Harry thought for a moment before responding. They had a free period before lunch, and since it would have been DADA after lunch, he would be free, too. But it was Hermione's birthday, and she would appreciate having the homework done and then a walk or whatever in their free time. "Sorry Ron, but not today, we would like to finish charms homework first," he finally said, and got an approving smile from Hermione. Seemingly, he had begun to understand the rules of the boyfriend game, as strange as they were in their case.

"Come on, we have to get in shape for the match. Slytherin won't be easy and we have to beat them, that homework isn't due till next week," Ron said with fervour.

"And that match is in November," an annoyed Harry replied, while Hermione rolled her eyes.

That obviously seemed to prove Ron's point somehow, at least in his opinion. "See, we don't have any time to loose, this is the most important match," he insisted, before making a crucial error. "We can always copy our homework later from 'Mione."

Harry had just enough time to flinch before Hermione reacted. "So that's all what I'm good for?" she asked with an expression between hurt and anger.

"Hey, you didn't want to date me, so what do you expect?" Ron huffed at her.

The sound of her hand impacting on his cheek was ear-splitting. Only their long, and now probably former, friendship kept her from using a fist like she had done with Malfoy years before. Without a further word, she stomped off, leaving Harry to deal with the jerk.

"You really can't help but to push her buttons, don't you?" Harry asked with a sad shake of his head.

Ron was also shaking his head, but for a different reason. "That girl is mental! What's wrong with her?"

"You! Good grief - you're such a bloody git, sometimes! Do you even remember that today is her birthday?" Harry replied angrily, shaking his head in chagrin as Ron at least had the decency to blush. "You know, if I were you, I'd stay the hell away from her," Harry added as he stalked off after his girlfriend, wondering how much deeper into the doghouse Ron would manage to get himself.

*** about a week later ***

"No, Professor, I don't have any idea what happened. I didn't see anything happen to him," Harry responded truthfully.

"According to your teammates, you were standing right next to him when he started screaming," Professor McGonagall asked again. "So there was no visible effect? No spell flash?"

"No, Professor. One second, he was showering and complaining about practice, and the next he started jumping and screaming."

"Interesting," she replied as she took some notes. "What did he shout? Just screams or did he say something?"

"Something about spiders and bugs, and then we should get them off him. Then he stared at us as if we were monsters or something. He slowly backed away from us and suddenly shouted about the walls melting and ran out off the shower."

Professor McGonagall nodded slowly as she took some more notes. "That explains his attire. That is all. Thank you, Mister Potter."

"Do you know what caused him to act that way?"

"No, Madame Pomfrey has checked Mister Weasley thoroughly, but found no signs of magic or potion traces. She suspects some food poisoning, or maybe an allergic reaction, as she found a huge variety of perishables when she drained his stomach. He'll need to spend the night in the infirmary for observation, but will be released tomorrow, in time for class."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry spoke as he stood and turned to leave the office. Although he never would tell, he had a slight inkling about who might have been responsible for this, concerning the number of trips Hedwig has made between Hermione and Grimmauld Place in the last week since Hermione's birthday. Still, he'd love to know the how...

ooOOoo

BANG!

The sound of the gun in the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack would have been just as devastating to their ears as the lead ball had been to the target, if they weren't wearing the earmuffs they had 'borrowed' from the Glasshouse. No one would miss two pairs, now

that class was over for the day, and they would return it before they'd head back to the castle.

"A bit low and..." Hermione stated, squinting her eyes to see the target better through the smoke. Waving her wand, she cleared the noxious fumes, continuing after the sight had cleared. "...to the right. You're yanking the trigger again, don't you?" she criticised his technique.

"As if you'd be a better shot," Harry teased back.

"It's not me who's owning a gun - and I'd do as well as you do, if it weren't for that I'm only half as strong as you are," Hermione replied testily, squinting her eyes at him before she turned and transfigured another piece of wood into a small pile of black powder.

It still bothered her that she couldn't keep that kicking mule on target, properly. The blackpowder charge and the nearly three quarters of an inch diameter lead ball produced entirely too much recoil for her to handle. Coupled with the built-in inaccuracy of the design, she was lucky if she hit the target at ten paces. She still remembered the words of Matty when she pointed out that deficit after he had briefed them on those weapons.

"Guns like that aren't used at range like a wand. They are up, close and personal! You'll feel the blood splash into your face!"

That comment was enough to dissuade Hermione from any notion to buy her own gun.

Harry immediately raised his hands and took a step back. "Ok, ok, sorry! Gee, at times like that I'm happy you don't have a gun, Hermione."

When she smirked at him, he couldn't help but tease her. "But then again, you'd never hit me with it," he laughed, and started running towards the shrieking shack as she stopped conjuring lead shots and gave chase, casting tickling charms at him in quick succession.

***October 12th, the road to Hogsmeade, early in the morning ***

"Have you given Professor McGonagall the note?" Hermione, asked Harry as she sneaked her arm into the crook of his arm. They were

casually strolling down to Hogsmeade on this bright October day, enjoying the last rays of sunshine before the grey Scottish autumn would set in.

Of course, they first had run Filch's even more aggressive gauntlet at the door - brandishing his detectors like a sword, he had prodded every student all over, although they were leaving the castle. More than one had commented on the stupidity of that, and had gotten some even less gentle prods in reply.

Harry tackled her lightly, careful to not make her stumble too hard. "Why, of course not, my dear," he replied in an overly British voice.

"Why should I keep her informed on us going to London to get your Apparition license, under supervision of my wizarding guardians; when I could just disappear in a time of war, keeping them wondering what might have happened, organizing search parties and giving us hell once we return?"

Hermione fought hard to keep the laughter to a smile. "How silly of me, that would take the whole fun out of it."

"Don't think about it," Harry smiled jovially. "You know that I could do with a bit more excitement in my life. It has been nothing but boring, ever since my birth," Harry said, both laughing loudly along the last meters into the town.

Approaching the 'Three Broomsticks', Harry stopped and held the door open for Hermione, inviting her in with a flourish. While she entered, Harry noticed Draco Malfoy had followed them, heading for the same pub. At least, the boy seemed to have learned his lesson to not mess with a Potter, finally. Ever since the meal incident, he kept clear of Harry, and even kept his big mouth shut. He still glared daggers at them during meals, but most of the time he was out of sight, somewhere.

Entering the bar, they made a beeline for the fireplace, and a quick look told him that most of Slytherin, at least the upper years, were already in town. He could see Zabini with some girls and Nott talking to some guys, among them Vaisey and Urquhart, some seventh years he knew from the team. That house seemed to start the day early on Hogsmeade days, probably to be 'away from the riff-raff'. Hermione, mentally already half through the exam, she took some

Floo powder - tossing it without breaking stride - and stepped into the fire. Harry waited for the flames to die down when the door opened to admit Malfoy, who scowled at seeing Harry standing there.

'Thank goodness I don't have to stay here with that ponce and his friends glaring at me,' Harry thought as he stepped closer to the fireplace, throwing a few Knuts into the bowl and taking some Floo powder to follow Hermione to Grimmauld Place. 'The sight of his face would have ruined my appetite,' he chuckled while throwing his handful of powder into the fire.

ooOOoo

Stepping out into the foyer of Grimmauld Place, he was immediately greeted by Tonks with a warm hug, followed by a healthy handshake and slap on the back from Remus. After the Grangers had their chance to hug the arrivals, they went to change, and within minutes, they had changed into normal everyday robes and prepared to leave for the Ministry. As the Ministry wasn't easily accessible to Muggles, the Grangers opted to wait for their return and to organize the ensuing party.

Hermione was already past mental revision and in full pre-test jitters mode, reciting the 'Three D's' and other theoretical stuff over and over, causing Tonks to roll her eyes most impressively - she was a metamorphmagus, after all.

Harry kept with the time-proven method of just ignoring it and carrying on as if nothing were wrong, and prompted Tonks to take the lead, since the Ministry was her 'turf'. Tonks did so, but only after flicking at Harry's left ear in passing. Harry added that technique to the long list of ways Tonks would use to apply non-magical punishment.

ooOOoo

His ear still tingled when he stepped out of the Ministry Floo. Rubbing the offending appendage, he briefly wondered if Tonks used depleted uranium to paint her nails with.

Together, they made it through the guard's station where a completely star-struck Auror was weighting their wands. Harry feared for a moment that the guard would keep his wand as a

memento to meeting the Boy-Who-Lived, but the man finally handed it back to him, if a bit reluctant. Hermione didn't notice it; she barely noticed anything until they were standing in the test office. All the time she was rehearsing her mental notes for the test, causing the other poor sod that was also waiting to sign up for the test to nearly wet himself in fear of being inadequately prepared as he heard her mutter under her breath. Harry shot him a glance and a sympathetic shrug, he had taken long enough to not be affected by her antics, anymore.

Finally, her application was filled, with every 'i' dotted and every 't' crossed, and she and the poor guy were sitting at desks in the test room, while the others were sitting outside in the waiting area. After non-cheating quills had been passed out, they were told that they have 30 minutes for the written theory part.

Hermione started scribbling like mad, the auto-engorgement charm on the test paper struggling to keep up with her space requirement. Five minutes into the test, her paper had tripled in size, the examiners' eyes had doubled in size, and her co-testee was sweating by the bucket.

Finally, the time was up and Hermione finished her last sentence. Reluctantly, she handed the now nearly four feet long sheet of parchment to the woman supervising the examination. The other testee was nearly crying as he handed his non-engorged paper over and ran out of the room, probably to hide in a toilet and bawl his eyes out. 'Or maybe getting sick,' Harry mentally corrected himself when he caught sight of the man's face as he rushed out.

Thus knowing that the exam was over, Harry and his 'bodyguards', as he jokingly called them ever since Matty had identified them as such, entered the room, where Harry moved immediately to hug a distraught Hermione, who kept whispering things like "I forgot ..." and "...sure to have that wrong..." while Harry shook his head when she wasn't watching, smiled supportively when she was, and kept on patting her back at all times.

Given the size of the parchments, the examiner started with the man's parchment. Within barely a minute, she stamped it 'Passed' and returned it to the man who had returned halfway through her correction. Still a bit green around the gills, he took it, shot Hermione a nasty look and rushed out to get the practical part done without

that damned witch in sight. Hermione was fidgeting around, biting nails while the examiner studied her test, which should be called a treatise, proper.

All the time, the woman gaped at parts of the answers, shaking her head or huffing at herself, and Hermione managed to get even more nervous - her nails already digging into Harry's lower arm. Harry chose to take this in stride, and tried to keep the wincing to a minimum, while Tonks found the situation most amusing. 'I wonder if sadism is a requirement to become an Auror,' Harry thought, keeping his mind focussed on the things they usually did when Hermione dug her nails into his flesh - that helped against the pain building up.

Before blood was shed, the examiner finished, letting the parchment drop onto the table and staring at Hermione, but saying nothing.

After a few seconds of being stared at, unblinking, Hermione couldn't take it anymore and asked "Did I pass?" in a shaking voice, like she was sure to have totally flunked it. Harry was grinning broadly, joined by Remus and Tonks, when the woman at the desk let her jaw drop at this comment.

"Pass? You could have written the book!" she blurted, while reaching for the 'Passed' stamp.

Shaking his head, Harry herded his squealing girlfriend out of the room.

ooOOoo

Ten minutes later, Hermione was lead out of the practical room, waving her Apparition Licence parchment at her friends, squealing "I did it!" - Like that would come as a surprise to anyone present.

Clutching his girlfriend in a bear-hug, Harry spun her around while the older couple offered their congratulations verbally. Coming to a standstill, Harry kept the hug a bit longer, while Hermione burrowed her face into his neck. As he felt her smile against his skin, he got a sudden idea.

"Remember about the woman saying you could write the book?" he asked. "Well if you'd like to do so, I could arrange for it to be published," he softly told her.

Much to his surprise, her hug became a strong squeeze at his words, while he thought he felt her collapse against him for a brief moment. "Is everything alright with you?" He asked as he held her at arm's length to look at her. She looked a bit flushed and seemed to be slightly dizzy; Harry immediately became afraid that she might have overextended herself while impressing the examiner with her Apparition prowess.

"Oh, yes, I'm fine," Hermione said, sounding a bit winded, though.

"Really?" Harry asked, still a bit concerned.. "Should I get you some water?"

"That might be a good idea," Hermione replied absent-mindedly, before she took a deep breath to compose herself. "How about a visit to Fortescue's? I could do with a chocolate ice-cream right now," she inquired, still rather flushed.

Tonks guffawed loudly, mumbling something sounding like "I bet you would," before leading the group towards the exit, pulling Remus after her, who was staring at Hermione with wide eyes, his nose twitching.

Harry kept wondering and protectively hovering around her all day, through lunch with her parents and the rest of the day they spent with them. Their day was topped by an hour relaxation in the sun on a tropical beach for the adults and a short stint on board of the Revenge for them, where she finally told him what had happened.

He should have known...

Tonks and Remus remained, in order to take the Revenge to Britain with a small crew of men. They estimated that it would take them two or three weeks, depending on the wind. Four weeks, tops, if they had to make their own wind.

After returning to Hogwarts in a rush of Portkey and Floo travel, followed by a nice walk up to the castle, Harry felt that this day had

gone rather well. His opinion improved when Hermione pulled him into a broom closet to continue celebrating.

ooOOoo

The next morning during their training, Ginny stormed in, completely out of breath and completely unaware of how close to a bad case of death she had come, bursting in like that. "Where have you been yesterday? I stayed up all evening, trying to find you anywhere!" she wheezed, doubled over from the run, while Harry averted his battlewand and carefully pushed the spell out of his mind.

"Celebrating my Apparition License on a sunny beach," Hermione smirked, causing her friend to go wide-eyed.

"Congratulations! Why didn't you take me with you? Merlin knows I could do with a tan," Ginny lamented, looking quite accusingly at her friends.

"Family business, we couldn't have taken you with us without consent of your parents," Harry replied.

When Ginny scowled back at him, he shrugged his shoulders. "It's the rules, don't give me that look," he admonished, a moment before Hermione could do the same. For a fraction of a second, she was looking put out that he had beaten her to the scold, but then she took a deep breath and calmed herself.

"Still, you'll be in big trouble if you weren't back in castle before curfew," the redhead changed the topic.

"We were, but we kind of got stuck in a cupboard we came by. We snuck back under the cloak, later," Hermione said, acting the innocent, and failing badly.

"You say such things just to make me envious, don't you?" Ginny huffed at her, mock glaring, but quickly losing interest in that activity and returning to the idle activity, gossip.

"Anyway - Did you hear? A fourth year Ravenclaw girl had been caught trying to sneak a cursed dagger into the castle. When McGonagall found out at the checkpoint with those detectors, she tried to draw the dagger and attacked, but McGonagall had her

bound before she even had the dagger out of her pocket. Turned out she was under the imperius curse," Ginny recounted the latest news in the Hogwarts gossip network.

"It was Malfoy," Harry said as soon as she had finished her tale.

Hermione was a bit put out that Harry would be so fast to judge. "While it is possible, I think it could have been someone other than Malfoy. Anybody could have done it - Hogsmeade is a public place," she chided her 'shoot from the hip'-type boyfriend.

Harry pondered her reply a bit. "Possible - that git probably isn't able to cast that spell properly," he replied smiling. Hermione rolled her eyes at him but contented herself with half a victory. After all, she had him only for a few months yet, so she should be grateful that he was house-broken already.

"If it was him, it was a stupid plan, for he must have known that the door would be checked on return," Ginny added her two Knuts to the discussion. Hermione nodded her agreement, then suddenly stopping and looking thoughtful for a moment, before she posed a question.

"Wait a minute - why on earth was McGonagall using those detectors? Isn't that Filch's job?"

"Well, he got a bit adventurous" - Ginny stretched that word wide, wiggling her eyebrows wildly - "with his detectors, especially with the older girls. When he jabbed his sodding sensor under Susan Bones' skirt, she slapped him silly, and threw a few good kicks in, for good measure. Professor Sprout was near and saved him from worse when she heard the commotion. After all the girls present told her what happened, Sprout took his sensors away and had the female professors on shifts, taking over the checks on the returning students. I have it on good authority that she was close to hexing him, herself. After last year and now this, I don't think we will see Filch much longer."

Harry was doubled over by the time she had finished her tale. Hermione was a bit more reserved, but not less amused.

"You know what?" Hermione told them after Harry had controlled his laughter a bit, "If he still were on duty, then, the girl would probably

have killed him. That means that he actually owes his life to Susan for slapping him," she laughed.

The other two readily agreed to that, after they had stopped rolling on the floor in laughter - literally, in Harry's case.

After breakfast and a bit of gossip, courtesy of Ginny, that assessment spread rapidly through the school. Even Filch grudgingly had to agree.

AN:

"You wanted to talk to me, boss?" Embirsiphonelilathia asked as she approached the Dark Lord Cliffy, who was looking through some papers at his desk.

DerLaCroix looked up from his work and took a bit to reconnect with reality. "Huh? Ahh! Yes, I did, indeed. I went through the expenses lately to try raising funds for another pet project of mine, and I stumbled across some strange receipts," he said, pushing papers here and there, looking for the receipts in question.

"Here they are!" he finally chuckled. "I hope you can tell me what this is about. Let me see, where was it... There. What did we order skinning knives, leather punches, an industrial size hydraulic bender and a half dozen tanning racks for? I don't remember anything that would require those," he asked, and Embirsiphonelilathia looked at the ground and started to draw a nervous circle with her right foot.

"Well, ah, I, the thing is..." she stuttered. "There were some minions mistreating library books, and I took exception to that, and thought the punishment should fit the crime," she said with a blush.

"Elaborate! Mistreating?"

"They dog eared pages and even set the book face down to mark their places, breaking their spines. A couple of books had pages ripped out, even," she replied, her face flushing again as she got angry while only thinking about what the poor books had to endure.

"Ok, that explains the knives and the bender," DerLaCroix chuckled. "Well done, that's all for now," he said, dismissing her.

"Wait!" he exclaimed as she nearly made it out. "What were the racks for? I know we have at least six St. Andrew crosses to hold them down."

"I had to replace the missing pages, didn't I? Surprisingly, they did have enough brain for tanning," Embirsiphonelilathia smirked, and left the room.

ooOOoo

Once again, I want to thank all the people who endured my writing to make it presentable. You know who you are.

Just if you want to know, that lead ball has the approximate weight of a cal 50 rifle round (~900 grains), so even with the softer push of blackpowder, this gun is not really suited for the delicate hands of an average 16 y/o girl. According to a friend of mine, it feels about like a 12 gauge - fired out of one hand...

Singled out minions:

Jarno - yes, I practice fencing, first Escrima, and currently, I try myself on rapiers, following the system of Fabris(at least I try to). Also, I forge swords, which means I have to be fit on the terms.

Reapers - Thank you very much. It is one of the greatest things for me to actually help people find inspiration.

Drauchenfyre - Not really. As the ring is an indestructible gift from Death himself, it obviously can't be destroyed. Also, you might notice that the Locket was still fully intact, the only damage was dealt to Kreacher. There are reports of fires in the ROR and Gringotts, but I never said that the Horcrux vessels themselves were destroyed, or the extent of damage. And I can tell you from experience, even a quickly extinguished fire that did no real damage to most of the contents will leave the whole room covered in soot, and you will look like a chimney sweeper when you try to clean it up. So, to clear all up, the Horcrux was destroyed, but the curse on it was still intact - in my opinion only destruction of an object or proper dis-spelling would remove a curse from it.

Chapter 20 - The grass is always greener....

Finally, on a rainy October 14th, nearly a month after their last visit to the Headmaster, Harry and Hermione were again invited into his office. Since their last visit, Albus Dumbledore had been more away from, than in the school, which most students saw as a sign of how bad things really were out there. The silent phase of the war had ceased and things were heating up again, although slowly. There was not much known, but there were rumours of attacks in the Muggle world.

"Hello, you two. Take a seat. Would you care for a lemon drop?" Dumbledore offered as soon as they had entered.

Harry chose to put the man off balance. "Yes, thank you," he said, and took one of the sweets. Since the Headmaster always ate from the same dish, Harry assumed them to be untainted, and the old man's face at the unexpected turn of events was priceless.

Professor Dumbledore immediately insisted that they should not procrastinate to watch the memory he had prepared, since it was a long one, and they dived into the pensieve. There, they met a younger Dumbledore on his way to an orphanage, where he met Tom Marvolo Riddle to deliver him his Hogwarts letter. Hermione and Harry were shocked to see the young boy sitting there, calmly telling a stranger about bullying people. Even more shocking was how carefully the boy could school his expressions to hide his true feelings. Even back then, Riddle was a masterful liar and manipulator. Even when he relented to return some stolen knick-knacks to the other kids, you could see that it wasn't done out of remorse or due to fear, it was a cool calculated act to get admission to Hogwarts. It was a very long memory, but eventually, they were ejected and landed back in the Headmaster's office.

"I can't believe you actually allowed him to attend Hogwarts," was the first thing Hermione said after they had sat down. "He was cruel back then, already. He even outright admitted that he had intentionally hurt people - he was actually proud of it!"

"I was under the impression that he could be reformed if he were given the chance," Dumbledore replied.

"Tell me, have you actually managed to reform anyone by now?" Harry snorted, and only a light flinch of the Headmaster's beard showed that this jab had hit the target.

"Please, let's keep on topic," Dumbledore said with a strained voice. "The important thing in this memory is his character. We have learned that Riddle never trusted anybody and had a magpie tendency."

"Does this have anything to do with the Ring and the Locket?" Hermione questioned.

"This, I can't say yet, but it is possible," Dumbledore evaded the question.

Hermione wasn't in the mood to let this slide. "Not yet? Why?"

"I don't believe such an important thing should be subjected to mere speculation and guesswork," Dumbledore replied evasively. Suddenly, he put on a surprised face. "Now look, isn't it amazing how time flies when you are in good company?" he said in his grandfather-voice. "I'm afraid it's really time for bed," he told his guests.

"I will explain on the next meeting, I promise," he stated when Hermione made motions to ask another question.

Only their considerable willpower and the time spent around the twins allowed Hermione and Harry to refrain from rolling their eyes at this thinly veiled dismissal in the face of uncomfortable questions.

ooOOoo

"You know, he's hiding something," Hermione muttered to Harry as they returned to Gryffindor tower.

"Of course he is; he's Dumbledore. As long as he breathes, he is hiding something. It's probably something very important, none of his business, will cause some good person harm in the name of the greater good, while trying to reform a lost soul. The problem is we don't have the slightest clue what," Harry agreed with her as they navigated the moving stairs back to their dorm. Again, Harry mentally questioned the sanity of whoever had the glorious idea to

cause staircases to switch their direction randomly. One day, it took him no less than ten minutes to cross two flights in the right direction. "At least I can't come up with anything," he sighed.

"That's par for the course - what bothers me more is that even I don't have any clue," Hermione teased, squealing as he dug his fingers into her side.

"I'm not that bad," he whined.

"Harry! I came in your arms in the middle of a Ministry hallway and you didn't get it until I told you later that day," Hermione quipped.

"You'll never let me forget this, won't you?" Harry smirked back. "But that's ok with me, Tonks will probably never let you forget this, neither," he tried to retaliate as they finally reached the right floor and turned right, heading for the next, stationary stairway.

"Why would I want to forget that?" Hermione mumbled, blushing more than just slightly.

"Good that you bring that up," Harry spoke as he put his arm around her, pulling her close. "You also forgot that nettling me like that makes me very creative in reminding you of your place," he whispered into her ear as his hand casually found her neck, grasping her hair playfully, but firmly.

"Aye, Captain," Hermione whispered, lowering her gaze in a well played gesture of obedience, that also hid her smug smile.

If Harry could read minds, he would have heard an echo of her prior statement.

*** A Tuesday evening***

Late in the evening, just in time for curfew, Ginny cautiously poked her head through the hole into the common room. Taking a quick look around, she confirmed that the path was clear and dashed up the stairs and into her dorm. Slamming the door shut and leaning her forehead against the cool wood, she gave a sigh of relief. She was safe, at least for now.

"Hello Ginevra," a cold voice greeted her.

Horried, she wheeled and saw that Hermione was sitting on her bed, just coming out of disillusionment, slowly fading into sight.

"Take a seat, would you?" Hermione said with a smile that didn't reach her eyes, tapping her wand onto her left palm repeatedly.

Slowly, as not to scare the older witch that probably knew more curses than the rest of the students combined, Ginny sat on the bed of Romilda, opposite to her own. Hermione's eyes rested on her, unmoving and unblinking, as if she considered what to transfigure the girl in front of her into.

"I'm sorry," Ginny blurted when she couldn't stand it anymore. "I thought you went to the room to practise and when I came in and saw Harry hitting you with that riding crop, I just reacted," she babbled, nervously fingering the hem of her skirt.

"You ran out," Hermione stated, evenly, but Ginny was terrified by the fact that she didn't tap her wand anymore. She now held it in a standard casting grip.

"When Harry fell, I saw that you were... and tied... table..." Ginny stuttered frantically.

"And you ran out on me..."

"You were screaming at me..." Ginny whispered, while she ducked her head.

"I think that was appropriate, since you just had stunned my boyfriend during sex," her older friend said icily. "No, that's not right, it was still during foreplay..." she corrected herself mid-statement before glaring at the redhead in front of her.

"And then you ran out!" Hermione hissed, her eyebrows unifying to a single one.

Ginny didn't answer to that. She knew that if Hermione weren't tied to that table, she would probably have cursed her already back then... 'BOLLOCKS!' it rushed through her head and made her cringe involuntarily when Ginny realized why Hermione was so mad at her.

"50 minutes. It took bloody 50 minutes until Harry woke up and could free me," Hermione confirmed as she noticed the younger girl connecting the dots. Naturally, she still glared.

"I'm sorry," Ginny repeated, once again, shrinking even more. "I am sorry that you were uncomfortable for so long."

"Uncomfortable?" Hermione shrieked. "Do you have any idea what you have done?" she yelled at her, falling quiet with a wince as she had leaned forward.

Ginny didn't reply anything, and kept her head down and quiet, since she actually had no idea.

Hermione took a deep breath, carefully settled back onto the bed and began to explain. "Apart from leaving me behind, bound and naked, which could have been disastrous on its own, if it weren't for the fact that only we three could enter that room," Hermione spoke in a very calm voice - something that worried Ginny much more than any yelling could ever do. "What you didn't see was that Harry and I were testing a new runic project of his! To give you a hint, it was a combination of an adhesive matrix coupled with a pattern that created rather loud sounds within a silencing pattern," Hermione completed her explanation.

Ginny tried to decipher that, but came up with nothing.

"It stuck to me and was vibrating. Rather heftily, I have to admit..." Hermione growled at her.

Ginny gaped open-mouthed at her friend.

Ever since returning to school this year, Hermione had started to confide in Ginny and chatted with her about the things two people in love could do to each other, most of those things Ginny had never even heard about before.

To be frank, if Ginny had just talked about something even as innocent as snogging at home, her mother would have washed out her mouth! So she wasn't used to anybody, let alone the known prude Hermione, being that forthcoming with info about her sex life.

Still, Hermione had never told her about details of her own sex life, only vague descriptions, and that some things were 'good' or 'not so good'. Given what Hermione and Harry evidently did, she wasn't surprised that Hermione wasn't that upfront. But why would she start chatting about her sex life just now?

Another look at Hermione told her that the girl didn't intend to do some pillow talk right now. Hermione gingerly shifted on the bed and leaned forward, glaring daggers. "It first... hit me... three minutes after you were out. But since my boyfriend was knocked out, he couldn't do anything," she sweetly told the smaller girl that slowly became aware what she had done.

"Six times! Six bloody times," Hermione growled, and Ginny winced in sympathy.

"Do you have any idea how fucking bad that hurts after the second time?"

Ginny winced again as Hermione's growl had grown even more threatening. Of course, part of the wince was due to the pain she could imagine. At this very moment, she wasn't sure anymore if she would leave this room alive.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said for the umpteenth time, "I promise to knock next time and not just assume you are training in there. I should have known better that you don't usually go training after class."

Hermione nodded her agreement. "And if you ever again stumble across us and do something stupid like stunning before asking, at least untie me, okay?" she said, while carefully easing herself into a standing position. Grimacing in pain, she waved her wand at herself, casting a new numbing charm at her lap and sighing in relief.

"I'll forgive you this time, since it was partly our own fault using the usual training room that lets you in; but if anybody learns about what you have seen, even the slightest bit, I'll let you experience that yourself for a whole day, understood?" Hermione promised that with a tone that left no doubt that she not only would do that, but also that the re-enactment probably would include a roughly sawn four by four pole, and no one would ever find her body. Ginny nodded her head fiercely in reply.

"Good. Now excuse me, I'm going to soak in the prefects bath for a day or so," Hermione stated and then made it out in wobbly steps.

*** October 26th, Hogwarts castle ***

"Ginny! What the hell are you doing?" Ron's voice rose over the din of the team as all moved towards the Great Hall and lunch after the practise.

The practise went rather well, considering the light drizzle the day had given them. Despite the wet and cold weather, the team started getting their act together and the new beaters proved to be good. Not stellar like the twins, but solid, and light-years beyond their predecessors.

Only Ron had a real bad day. He started with a few good saves, but then he missed one and got so furious at himself that he missed nearly every single one that followed before he eventually recovered. His mood never did.

The chasers, on the other hand, worked like a well-oiled scoring machine. With Ginny and Katie as example, Demelza quickly fell into her rhythm, and they tore Ron apart.

When the practice finally was over, Ginny ran ahead of the team with Dean, who had been sitting out the session due to a light hand injury during Herbology that would be fine by Friday, the last day before their match. Harry met up with Hermione in front of the changing rooms after she had watched the practice like a dutiful girlfriend, under a conjured umbrella and a book in hand.

Ron's shout and his full stop interrupted the motion of the whole group and ended the amorous chit-chat between Harry and Hermione at the back of the group, since they nearly walked into the suddenly stopping Katie Bell.

"What does it look like to you, dear brother?" Hissed the angry voice of Ginny, which was a sure sign that bat-bogies were soon to fly. Naturally, most of the team took this as their sign to rush off, leaving Harry and Hermione standing in a nearly empty hallway. Nearly, except for a furious Ron and a confused Dean with a spitting mad Ginny still in his arms, but glaring at her brother.

When Ron made the mistake to point out that it wasn't appropriate to snog in the corridors-in a slightly less cultivated manner-Harry was sure that this would not end well.

After a shouting match that figuratively burned Ron to a cinder with several scathing remarks about his maturity and love life, especially the lack of both, Ginny just noted that she should find a broom closet for Dean and her. Letting actions speak for her, she took off, dragging the slightly put out looking Dean Thomas after her. This caused a sputtering Ron to follow them, but not before he glared an accusing look at Hermione and Harry for laughing so hard.

The 'battle of the broom closet' as people had christened the later occurring fight, was the talk all over school for days. The detentions lasted even longer.

ooOOoo

"Strange," Harry mouthed after he was finally alone with Hermione. Raising an eyebrow in question, Hermione prompted him to share his musings.

"I wonder about Ginny's perfume, did you notice that flowery smell?"

Hermione frowned. "Yes, I know. She has started wearing the same perfume as me. At first, she nicked some when we were at the Burrow last summer, and to keep her off mine, I finally gave her a bottle for her birthday."

"Oh yeah, right, I knew I had noticed it somewhere before. Why did you stop?" Harry asked after he had sniffed at her neck. "I like that smell."

"I ran out of it sometime on the island, I used it for years. We'll have to shop for it sometime, okay?" Hermione smiled at him, before smirking evilly. "Or I can ask Ginny for a bit. She seems to have lots to spare if she uses so much that we could smell her across the hallway," she said laughing, Harry joining in.

They turned and continued their way to lunch, and somewhere along the way, Harry pulled her close. "So you did snog Krum?" he

commented one of the points Ginny had brought up. "I thought it was only a goodnight kiss," he teased her.

Hermione gnawed at her lip while she mentally cursed her red-headed chatterbox friend. "What would you've done in my place?" she replied with a small snort "Imagine you had a date with, say... Gabriella Sabatini, would you have refused a kiss?"

"If you put it that way," Harry chuckled as he pulled a dangling rope to open one of the shortcuts hidden behind a tapestry and invited her to step through.

"She is hot," he commented off-handedly as he caught up and slung his arm around her waist. Hermione smirked superiorly back as he conceded that argument.

A few moments later, she yelped in surprise when Harry pulled her into an alcove, pinning her against the wall. "You know what; I now think it was your perfume I smelled with the Amortentia..." he whispered into her ear, before his lips descended onto the vein at her neck.

***November 2nd ***

On the day of the match, Ron was a nervous wreck at breakfast.

The practice yesterday was terrible. Ron had been in a terrible mood for the last few days, and every time he saw Ginny, he felt furious. That was mirrored by his keeper performance at the practice. Not even the Chudley Cannons' current keeper had received so many goals in the span of a single hour. In one particular low-point, he came within an inch of performing the Starfish without stick.

He barely ate a thing, and when Harry told him to finish up so that they could leave for the pitch, he bolted to the loo in order to return even the little bit he had managed to eat.

"Maybe you should give him some of your luck potion, Hermione; but that would be useless if he can't keep it in," Ginny suggested with a laugh that was echoed by the rest of the team as Ron rushed out.

Despite their Keeper being in tatters, the team was quite relaxed. While they were playing Slytherin, they knew that they would not be hard-pressed to win. When the team was introduced yesterday, they found out that the snakes had a new, inexperienced fourth year for seeker that had no chance to beat Harry. Malfoy had resigned for some reason. All they had to do was keep possession of the Quaffle, ratchet up the score, and wait for Harry to seal the win.

*** Later that day ***

Harry groaned happily as Hermione's hands continued doing their magic. She was currently straddling him while her hands ran over his chest, massaging his strained muscles.

"Now I know why professional players get a massage right after the game," he nearly purred as Hermione's finger dug into the spot where the chest muscle connected to the arm.

"You better plan on only having me do that once you turn pro, buster," Hermione mock-growled back as she dug her fingers into his sides, catching his attention.

"If you think you'll get out of this chore, you've got another thing coming," Harry growled back, catching her tickling fingers. "And now behave, or it'll be sore all day," he said. Reaching out and taking hold of her curly locks, he pulled her down, face-to-face. "And then you'll be the same for a week," he threatened with a smirk.

"Aye, aye, Capt'n," Hermione replied with a lewd grin, before she licked his nose. Laughing, she settled back to continue her work, while Harry drew a face as he wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

At a score of 60 to 40 for Gryffindor, Harry had spotted the snitch. The problem was, it was heading straight towards the opposite seeker, and it was only a matter of time until the boy would have noticed it. So Harry had pushed his broom to the maximum, and managed to catch it a fraction of a second before the other did, wrapping his hand around Harry's.

But holding hands while flying in opposite directions meant pulled muscles. Harry was the bigger one, and came off lightly - the other seeker actually came clean off his broomstick and had to be floated

to the infirmary with a dislocated shoulder and a broken elbow. For Harry, it was only one potion and a recommendation to get a massage from his fiancée.

"I still can't get the picture out of my mind," Hermione said after a while, when she moved her hands to his stomach, caressing his developing six-pack. 'A bit more time with Tonks and he will be perfect,' she thought, trying to paint the disgusting memory currently plaguing her over with the sight of her Captain beneath her.

"Me neither," Harry sighed. "But the sound was even more disgusting - I can't believe I actually heard them over the din in the Common room!"

"You prat!" Hermione gave him a hard slap on the chest for that. "Did you have to remind me of that? I was glad when Lavender finally pulled Ron out of the room to find a private place," Hermione chided him. "Honestly, I wonder how she managed to remove her tongue from his stomach long enough to do so," she added as an afterthought.

"True. They were scary - remember that movie your dad chose? The one your mother hated so much and was scared to death of? What was it called... 'Alien', I think," Harry chuckled and Hermione replied with a bout of laughter that made her wiggle on his lap quite nicely.

"True. Let's call them 'Facehuggers' from now on. They won't get it, but the Muggleborn and Halfbloods will spread it like wildfire," Hermione replied with her most evil smile, making Harry wonder how much longer his former best friend would stay in the doghouse.

"By the way, it was very sweet how you handled Ginny throwing herself at you; the poor thing," Hermione said, giving Harry a loving kiss on the chest.

"What was I supposed to do? Shag her in front of everybody? Make a scene? Or dump you just because she made advances on me? It was best just to laugh, give her a hug and tell her that once you decide to share, she would be the first I call. And I know you won't, ever," he chuckled as she gave him the evil eye.

"You better remember that! But I meant how you took her aside and talked to her. It was kind of cute how she cried herself out on your shoulder."

"I doubt she'll remember in the morning," Harry said, pulling his girl down on top of him.

Hermione snuggled herself into a comfortable position before she answered. "True. While I can understand her being down after Dean dumped her; to get herself so thoroughly plastered... Wait till I find out who brought the Firewhisky," she growled.

Harry nodded sadly, flinching as while doing so, he had tickled his nose with her hair.

"At least he wasn't too much of an ass about it. I talked to him; one of the things was that he wasn't sure if Ron was opposed to him dating Ginny because he's black instead of a principled 'my sister dies as a virgin' thing. But in the end, he decided that it wasn't worth it after he saw Ginny fight with Ron at the 'battle'. You know, they actually started hexing each other - Dean said he now knows how it would be to fight with her, and that finally sent him running. He didn't want to throw a spanner into our team's works, so he just waited until after the game to call it quits," he informed her of his talk to Dean.

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "I'll talk to her later. Given the 'Tuesday incident', she will probably be scared to death around me if I don't, after how she rubbed herself on you like a pole dancer. And I'll certainly have words with her about alcohol, moderation and restraint. To think she was like that because she wanted to drown her sorrows - think how she would be when you win the cup - she would try to shag her way up and down the boy's tower! Probably starting with you," she added with a smirk.

"I hope so, after all, I am the most attractive boy in there," Harry preened himself smugly, before he had to defend himself from a vicious tickling attack.

ooOOoo

November, and thus the first snow, had come and confined the students to the castle, except for short stints. Almost unnoticed by

Harry, due to the intense practice schedule, Dumbledore once again was nowhere to be found, except for occasional appearances in the Great Hall, just to vanish before even Ron had finished his first helping.

Since their primary quest was completely put to a stop by that problem, Harry and Hermione tried to use the time as efficiently as they could. This meant they were usually to be found researching in the library or reading in the common room, something that finally put an end to the slight remains of Harry's and Ron's friendship. With Ron being distracted by Lavender and Harry not wanting to goof off pointlessly with him anymore, they slowly drifted apart. By the time December came, they were not much more than just teammates anymore.

About a week after the match, after class had ended for the day, Ginny stormed into the common and violently flopped herself down on the couch next to Hermione, jostling her. Looking up from the huge tome on her lap, Hermione elbowed Harry on her other side, and went right back to an interesting chapter about the numerological properties of zero.

Looking up as well, Harry leaned forward and beamed a smile at the fuming girl on the other side of the couch. "Any interesting new ones, Goforit?" he chuckled from the safety of his seat behind his girlfriend.

"Oh stuff it, Potter," Ginny huffed in reply. She had to bear some ridicule for being a randy drunk, especially new names for her popping up continuously.

"I, for one, am still particularly fond of 'Githimdone'," Hermione remarked without looking up. Ginny's glare found her, but soon targeted Harry, who had foolishly voiced his approval.

"Don't gimme that look," Harry chuckled. "It's your own fault, and it could have been a lot worse if I had reacted differently," he scolded her lightly.

Ginny deflated slightly as he put her straight. "I know, but it grating on my nerves," she moaned. "I swear, I'm never going to touch alcohol again!" she stated once more. She already had given that vow in an emotional and teary talk to Hermione right after the

hangover had passed. As far as she was concerned, this was her first and last try to drown her sorrows.

"You haven't heard the worst," Harry replied. "After lunch, someone tried to be very creative within our earshot," he scowled. It turned into a smile as Ginny bristled and demanded a name and details.

"I'm not telling, and I won't repeat what he said, but rest assured he's been punished," Harry said, eliciting a snort from Hermione. After Ginny rose an eyebrow questioningly, he chose to satisfy her curiosity. Partly. "Hermione here hit him with a surreptitious jinx she got from the Black library. He'll probably be praying for death already, but be too embarrassed to get help."

Ginny turned her attention to Hermione, who smiled, but said nothing as she continued to read her book. Ginny cleared her throat, and then once more, but Hermione kept on reading, stringing her nosy friend on.

"Please?" Ginny wheedled. Hermione's smile increased a few watts, and she gave one simple statement, while turning the page.

"Jala-pee-neo jinx."

Cringing, Ginny considered justice done.

"Don't worry about the people mouthing off, it will soon be over," Harry consoled her. "Your brother is seen all over the castle trying to suck Lavender's face off. With such a target, your slight blunder will soon be yesterday's news," he said. Ginny hoped that he was right, and that it soon would be forgotten. By everyone, but her...

ooOOoo

Shortly afterwards, Ginny renounced dating completely, after some seventh year Ravenclaw invited her to the 'Three Broomsticks' for the mid-November Hogsmeade visit. It turned out that he had less pure motives and tried to get her drunk enough for his plans, which earned him a follow-up date with a couple of bat bogies while Ginny stormed off to the castle. Another teary session with Hermione followed, and the next day, the boy was found stuck upside down to the wall near the Ravenclaw dorm, in only his boxers, with 'date rapist' painted across his chest.

For some reason, Hermione showed pity on Ron - and Lavender at the same time - and didn't tag- them them with the nickname, like she had planned to. Harry wasn't sure if this was due to the fact that there were already enough derogatory names flying around or mere pity because their kissing was really pathetic.

The rest of December was also uneventful, nearly bland, as everybody was studying frantically for the end of term while the snow and cold prevented any sort of excursion outside. Well, not really uneventful, because when Hermione went into her normal study overdrive, Harry invented the study point system.

This meant that Hermione could buy points equal to a half hour of study by performing various acts. His basic sheet started out with a single point for a blow job and some points for various other things - Hermione couldn't help being herself and turned the simple sheet Harry had scribbled on, into a huge scroll with hundreds of colour coded things to do and options that could be combined, that could send a porn actor into a panic.

Since the only real safe time for longer, really point-worthy things were the infamous shagging Tuesday hours, Hermione once again proved her competitive streak by drawing up exquisite plots for that day, to maximise her score to last for the rest of the week.

Sadly, someone else seemed to have discovered the Room of Requirement, too, since it was frequently occupied and unavailable. Still, between the times it was available and the help of an invisible cloak and the Marauder's map to get Harry into a secluded spot, most of the days were filled with short, but randy encounters to keep her point account topped off. Harry one time joked that her average sperm content over the day exceeded his own, but hurried to add that he was not even close to complaining about that.

So while everyone else could only see that Hermione spent most of the day in the library studying, while Harry only joined her for a few hours a day, Harry in fact had the time of his life.

Nonetheless, the public image of Hermione abandoning Harry for her studies led to one person having ideas above her station...

*** December 21st, Hogwarts Express ***

"...in the end, I had to stick that stupid bint to the ceiling to make her back off. Honestly, the nerve!" Hermione huffed as she told the others the tale.

Neville was sitting on the floor of the compartment, laughing, having slid from his seat. Luna had joined him there, laughing less hard, but using the opportunity to cuddle with the boy. They had spent a great time at Slughorn's Christmas Party, where Luna had worn mistletoe as hair ornament, and used that as an excuse to kiss Neville the whole night long. She was currently wearing a purple lip balm to deal with the chafing, but she smiled nonetheless.

"She really tried to slip Harry a love potion?" Ginny asked incredulously. "I never knew what a bloody cow Romilda was. But what has that to do with Ron ending up in the hospital wing for a whole day?"

Harry stifled a laugh at that. "Well, that was how we found out about the potion; Romild... The Bint," he corrected himself after a fierce glare from Hermione "had handed me a Christmas present when I passed her on the way to my dorm. Turned out to be full of cauldron cakes, which I despise," he continued, being interrupted at this point by an indignant snort from Hermione. She was still peeved that The Bint didn't even know that much about Harry, but still tried to snatch him from her.

"Anyway, I thought about being nice to Ron, and left them on his bed. When we came back, the whole common room was talking about how Ron infuriated Lavender by serenading about R-The Bint to her, until she hexed him so badly that he had to be taken to Pomfrey. Turned out he was filled to the brim with love potion, though. Took Pomfrey a potion to neutralize and a salve to remove the boils from his groin, before she sent 'Won-Won' and the frantically apologising Lavender back to the tower."

By the time he finished, Neville and Luna were only able to make yapping noises from the floor, and Ginny was laughing tears at the picture of Poppy no-nonsensically massaging a salve onto 'tiny Ron'. Dabbing her eyes with a hanky, Ginny sputtered another question between gales of laughter. "Brilliant... but that... can't have taken... long... Why the whole... day... then?"

Harry had to fight the laughter to continue telling, while Hermione alternated between glaring and bursting into laughter. "Well, Lavender was desperate to apologise to her Won-Won for her reaction after she found out. Being smooth as he is, Won-Won thought this would be the perfect time to blackmail her into going a step further. She took exception to his suggestions of a proper apology. Pomfrey had to brew a batch of special healing potions to deal with all the damage her knee caused," Harry ended in tears of laughter, while Hermione had to cling to him to keep on her seat.

Neville had to actually visit a healer the next day, having hurt something by laughing so hard.

ooOOoo

Everybody was happy as they left the train at Kings Cross after the long ride. Harry and Neville, the latter one still clutching his sore belly from the laughter, helped the girls to get their trunks from the overhead rafters, before all left the carriage and the train. Hermione and Harry had their trunks already shrunk since they had planned to have Hermione side-along them both to Grimmauld place.

Their friends Neville and Luna had bid their goodbyes soon after, as they went to meet Neville's Grandma. Neville was especially eager to present his girlfriend to her, but Harry would bet that the stern woman would not be overly pleased with the girl with lilac lipstick. Knowing that it was in fact a potion to heal her lips from the overlong session of kissing her grandson probably wouldn't help things. Harry would bet that Luna would mention this fact within the first ten seconds.

Saying goodbye to Ginny, both checked for the trunks in their pockets, and Hermione laid her hand into Harry's elbow. While Hermione turned expertly, Harry noticed a sharp jerk, very different to the usual feel of apparition; which was more like being squeezed. While Hermione lost contact to him and vanished, Harry found himself face to face, or better face to bun with the one head smaller Weasley matron, which was already yelling at him at the top of her voice.

"What are you thinking, running away like that and not telling anybody! We were running all over the country looking for you, and

then you go on and mouth off at the Headmaster? I didn't raise you like that..."

Harry was on the verge of blowing up at her as she continued yapping and yelling at him, but a short look at a nearly crying Ginny made him stop and roll his eyes in her direction with a smirk. This had the wanted effect of calming Ginny down, while it had the side-effect of having Molly slap him.

"And don't roll your eyes at me, young man! I..."

With a short burst of wandless magic, Harry had Molly petrified. This turned out to be redundant, since Hermione had just reappeared a few moments before and just did the same. Hermione was just as shocked as he was, so both stood there for a moment without saying anything, trying to come up with appropriate words, but failing. Then, Harry gave the thoroughly shocked, but quickly turning spitting mad Ginny, a wan smile and went over to Hermione. This time, they managed to disapparate undisturbed.

Sighing, Harry let himself fall into the couch at the entrance hall of Grimmauld Place twelve. He rubbed his head, trying to forget the incident on the platform, as he lamented, "Why can't I just get a break? Why couldn't I just go with Remus and Tonks, instead? I bet they had a fun ride."

*** December 21st, Hogwarts Lake ***

"Damn it, Remy! Can't anything go smooth on this bloody ride?" Tonks cursed as she saw the Giant Squid again trying to get a grip on the submersion shields of the Revenge.

They had a terrible ride over to Britain from the island. At first, they were hit by an exceptionally late, but nonetheless fierce Hurricane a week after they had left the island eastbound, and were blown all the way back and more, to the American coast, where they decided to head north to get out of the Hurricane belt. They lost over a week to that freak storm, but the crew took it in stride, it needed more than a storm to damage the Revenge. Remus did miss some of it, spending that time in the brig, the ship's jail - consisting of some cages in the lowest deck, which proved to be a good place for his transformation.

Then, they sailed up north to Canada and Greenland, then turning east to set course for Iceland. Oh yeah, that name did fit. Tonks didn't pack for that kind of weather, but transfigured some clothes and kept warming charms around her all the time. Still, she was afraid she would never feel warm again, while the men ran around in little more than padded jackets. She was sure they did so only to mock her. Needless to say, they lost another two weeks to that detour.

When they got caught in some pack ice before even really leaving Greenland, she had the opportunity to blow off some steam. Swearing and cursing the paint off the ship, she single-handedly blasted them a channel through at least two miles of the ice when she lost her temper over being stuck in ice, before she got exhausted and let a different crew member take over. It lost them another three days to cross the ice patch, but at least the crew had ceased ribbing her about her warm clothing. Remus also missed that outburst being curled up in the brig.

Near Iceland, Tonks had flown into a near homicidal rage when some Kabautermen, small ship kobolds, had decided they liked the ship better than the fishermen's boats and snuck aboard while they took over provisions in a small magical settling in a fjord near Árborg. Sadly, they had noticed the infection only after the creatures had half a day to wreak havoc in Tonks' wardrobe. Most of the clothes were not salvageable, especially after Tonks had blasted the creatures to smithereens. The sailors started to give Tonks a wide berth after that.

Finally, they reached Scotland, and went into submerged mode to get through the underwater passageway to get to Hogwarts. Thankfully, the way in there had been charted long ago, and it took the crew little fuss to navigate it. In the end, they arrived at Hogwarts on the 18th of December, instead of early November.

Only to run into an overly active giant squid that for some reason took a liking to the submerged ship. They had planned to swim up using bubble-head and warming charms, melting a hole into the ice and then freezing the surface again to hide the traces. The men would then lodge in London, taking some days off until Christmas, when they could get sent home by Harry.

This was now impossible as the giant squid was cuddling the boat for a whole day now, and they didn't really want to swim past it in the agitated state it was if they didn't have to. The alternative was bringing the ship to the surface, which would be a risky move and hard to conceal from prying eyes.

But Tonks knew that if that effing squid wasn't gone by evening or, Merlin beware, started humping the ship, she would take her chances.

"I wish I were with Harry!" Tonks lamented. "He probably had a fun ride."

AN:

"Ahh, bo-oss?" Embirsiphonelilathia asked carefully as she entered the throne room. "Why did you give the minions orders to build that huge corral and stables?"

DerLaCroix looked at her as if she just had asked why the sky was blue. "To take over the world, of course! I will take over by assuming control over the world's most important medical substance."

Embi mulled over that a bit before asking a follow-up question. "But why do you need a corral for Penicillin? Wouldn't a laboratory more adequate?"

"Who cares for Penicillin? I will catch all the hippos of the world!" the Dark Lord Cliffy dismissed her question.

"Hippos? Since when are they medically important?" Embirsiphonelilathia asked incredulous.

"Of course they are! Doctors even swear an oath on their deliveries of hippos!" DerLaCroix insisted as he paced up and down the room in agitation.

"They do? On their deliveries?"

"Yes - they swear on their Hippo-crates! This oath is taken so seriously, that they even have a insult for people who don't take their own oath seriously but call out others on their oaths all the time - they call them Hippo-critics or short, Hippocrits," DerLaCroix told her

with an air of presumptuousness as he went over and lowered himself into his throne.

Embirsiphonelilathia stared at her Lord for a few moments, and then bowed and backed out of the room, deciding to ignore this and to just relay the orders.

ooOOoo

Once more, thanks to Embi, alix, and Joe Lawyer. From now on, you'll get double of what I paid you so far. I know, I know, no need to thank me...

Sorry for the long delay, life continues being interesting for me, at least it has now entered the 'good' kind of interesting part of the usual cycle.

Singled out minions:

MariusDarkwolf - Embi handles Human Resources... I think your ID badge will be in the post in a few days. Don't worry, it's just coincidence that it has a shield form...

SomeGuyFawkes - Point one - Style. And the fact that the man who made Harry's gun-wand wasn't an employee of Heckler&Koch. Point two - read again, its intended to be slightly hidden what this refers to.

Bahamut Slayer - thank you, glad you liked it. I can always need a fan. (But if you start throwing your underwear at me, I'll have to kill you out of principle - no bad feelings, ok?)

Chp21